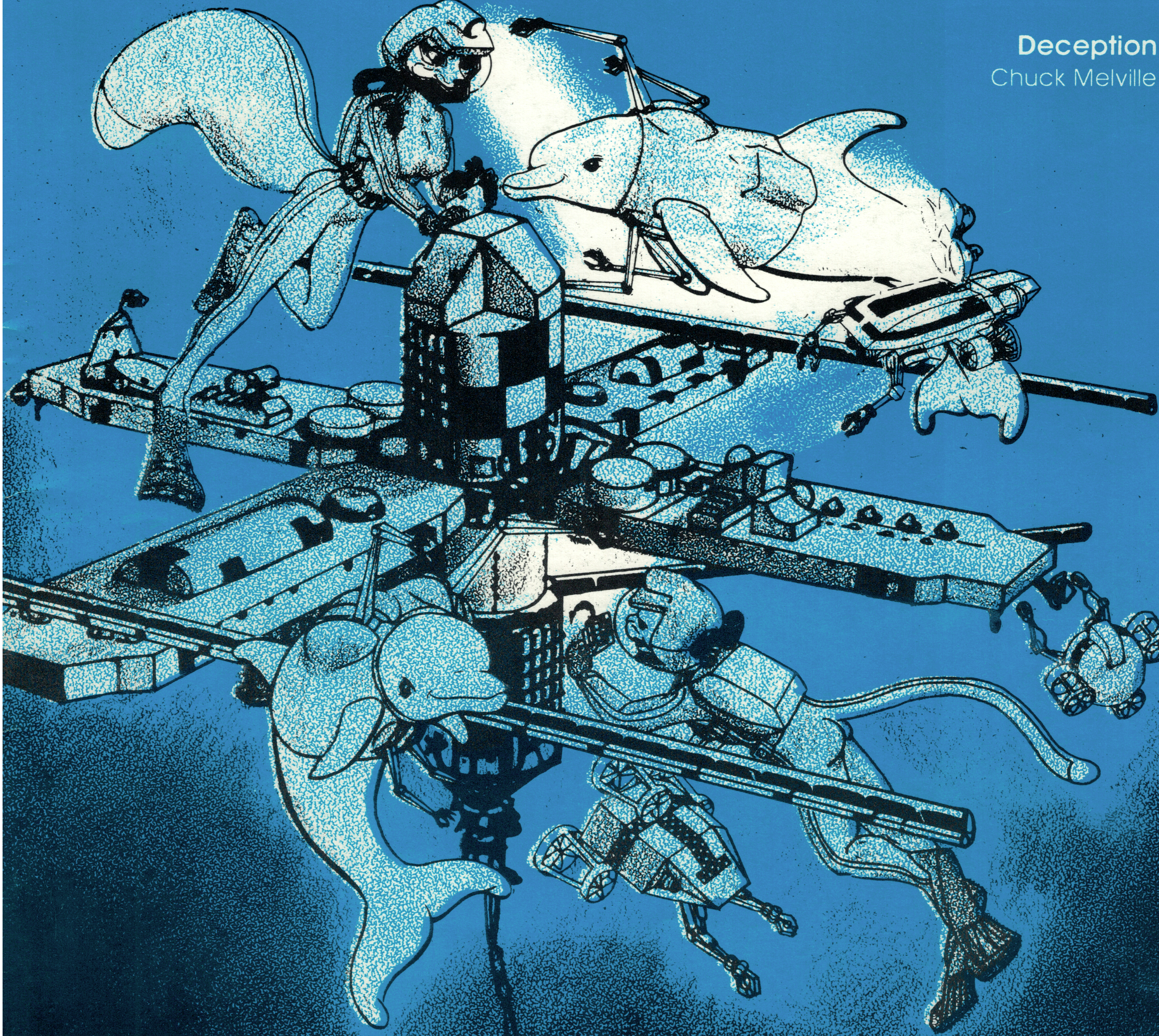
The Journal of the MSTF

Mythagoras

No. 2
Summer 1990
$3.50

Of Storm and Furry
Lawrence Schoen

Deception
Chuck Melville



Maggie de Alarcon • Juan Alfonso • Eric Blumrich • Bill Fitts
Kevin Higgins • Michael Hirtes • Gary Jurman • Kevin Kinne
Watts Martin • Kay Shapero • Tom Verré • Diana Whatley

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MYTHAGORAS

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ALL THE COOL FOXES ARE DOING IT

Fandom can be a wonderful hobby (or even way of life): a group of people enjoying a common interest, enjoying each others' company, sharing stories and song, attending great conventions—and tearing each others' throats out. Maybe it's not all so wonderful sometimes. Cliques form, rumors are spread, and high-school style politics start to destroy the enjoyment for fans who are "only" interested in what brought them together in the first place, be it "Star Trek," Superman or funny animals.

In our naivete, we assumed that furry fandom was too small for such politics to develop. Yet over the past year some dedicated groups of furry fen have gone out of their way to prove us wrong. Furry fandom is too small to survive constant shelling, especially from inside. Differences will occur between individuals in any group, but deliberately fueling the flames, trying to destroy the reputation of other fans or professionals (or groups), is petty vindictiveness. Worse, it ultimately affects all of us—every artist, writer, or once-enthusiastic contributor who is driven away from the fandom by unfounded rumors, suffers one too many personality conflicts or is dismissed, for whatever reason, by "professionals" he admires and respects is another wound. Fatal, no. But after enough cuts and bruises, even the strongest warrior will succumb—there won't be enough left of him to keep fighting.

The details of the particular fights that have gone on, and are likely still continuing, are unimportant. Both sides of any debate usually have valid points. However, the debates cannot be allowed to take over furrydom or any fan movement. Personality has no bearing on a person's creative talent, nor their ability to enjoy others' works or to contribute to others' enjoyment. When the debate becomes a personal vendetta, it doesn't matter whether the parties involved are neofans or seasoned pros. Regardless of who wins, everyone loses. Even those who weren't part of it.

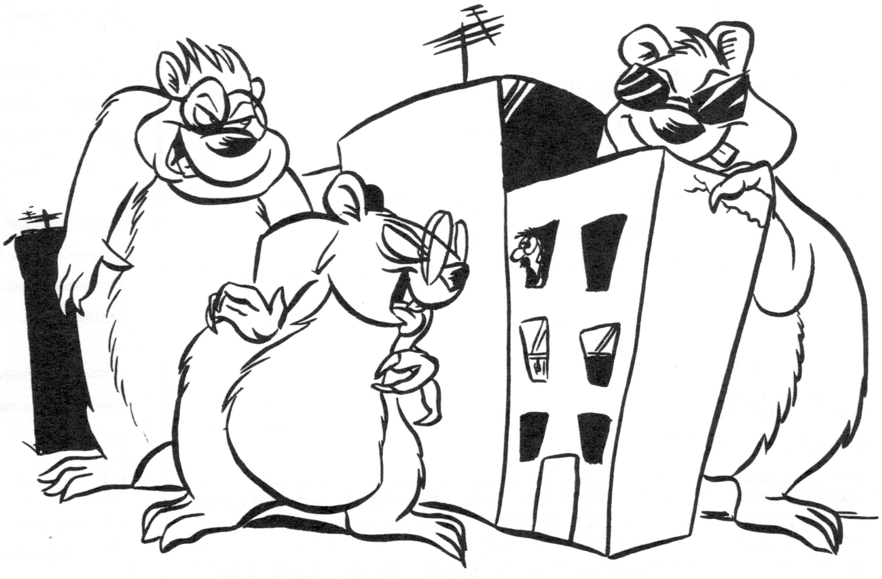
Of course, you'd think most of this was common sense. You'd think no rational adult would need this spelled out explicitly. We used to think that, too. It is both surprising and saddening to learn we were wrong.

◆ ◆ ◆

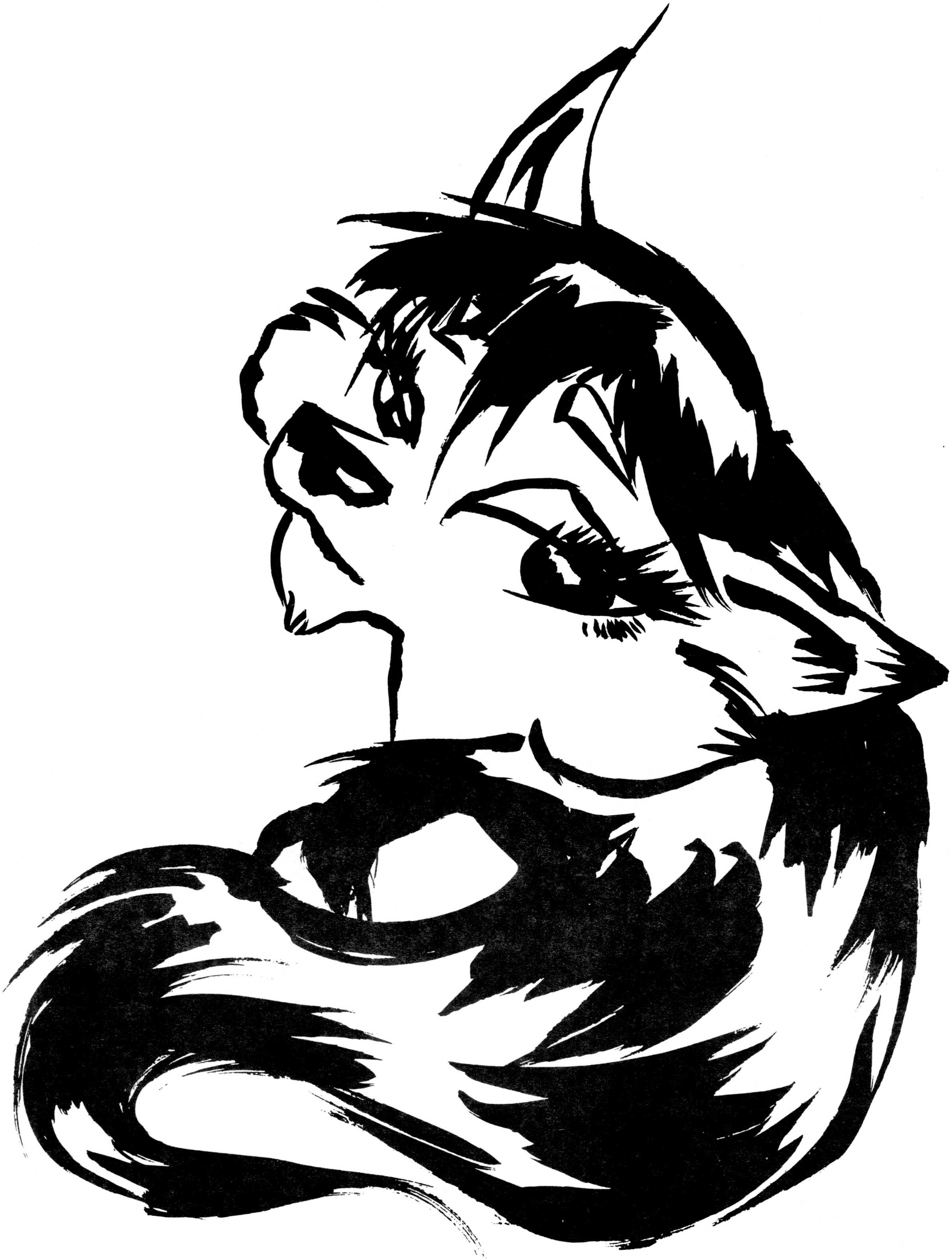
We had promised a "Letters to the Editor" section, along with a fan directory, for issue #2. Well, we only got two letters, and as it turns out we don't have room for them. And we don't have room for the "Other Publications" list, "Kiosk" or a more detailed Remote Access Systems list. Oh, well.

We do have the first part to three stories, two of which are continuing serials. In fact, the only complete stories in this issue aren't "furry"—a cyberpunk superhero story and an endearing little fantasy tale by Kevin Higgins.

Next issue concludes "Travelling Music," and sees the continuation of "Of Storm and Furry" and "Deception." In addition, look for new features by Jo Davidsmeyer and Chris Grant, and "Ultrasheep" by Bernie Middendorf and Franklin Veaux. ❑



"HI, DOC! REMEMBER US FROM YOUR GROWTH EXPERIMENT?"



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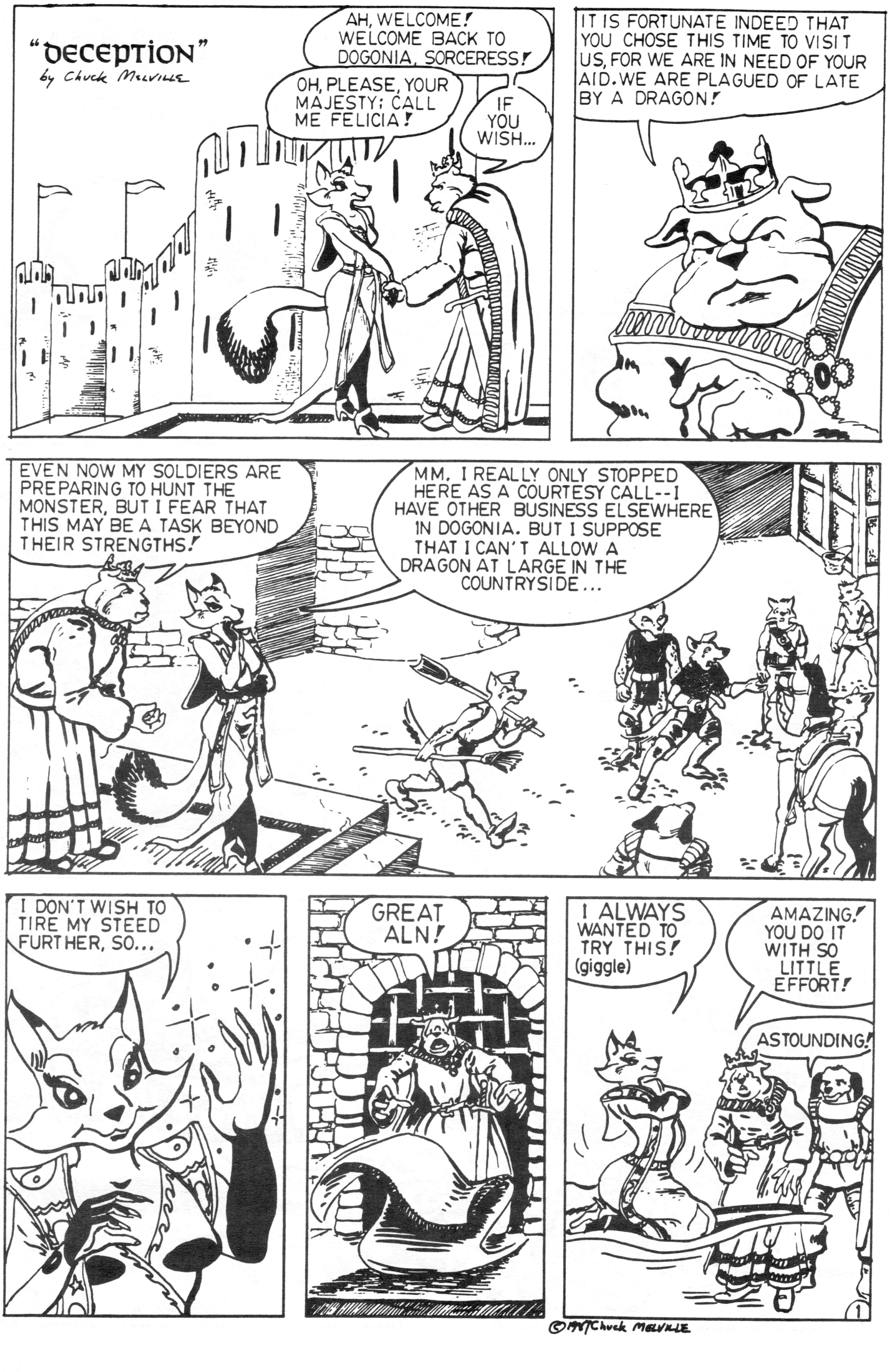
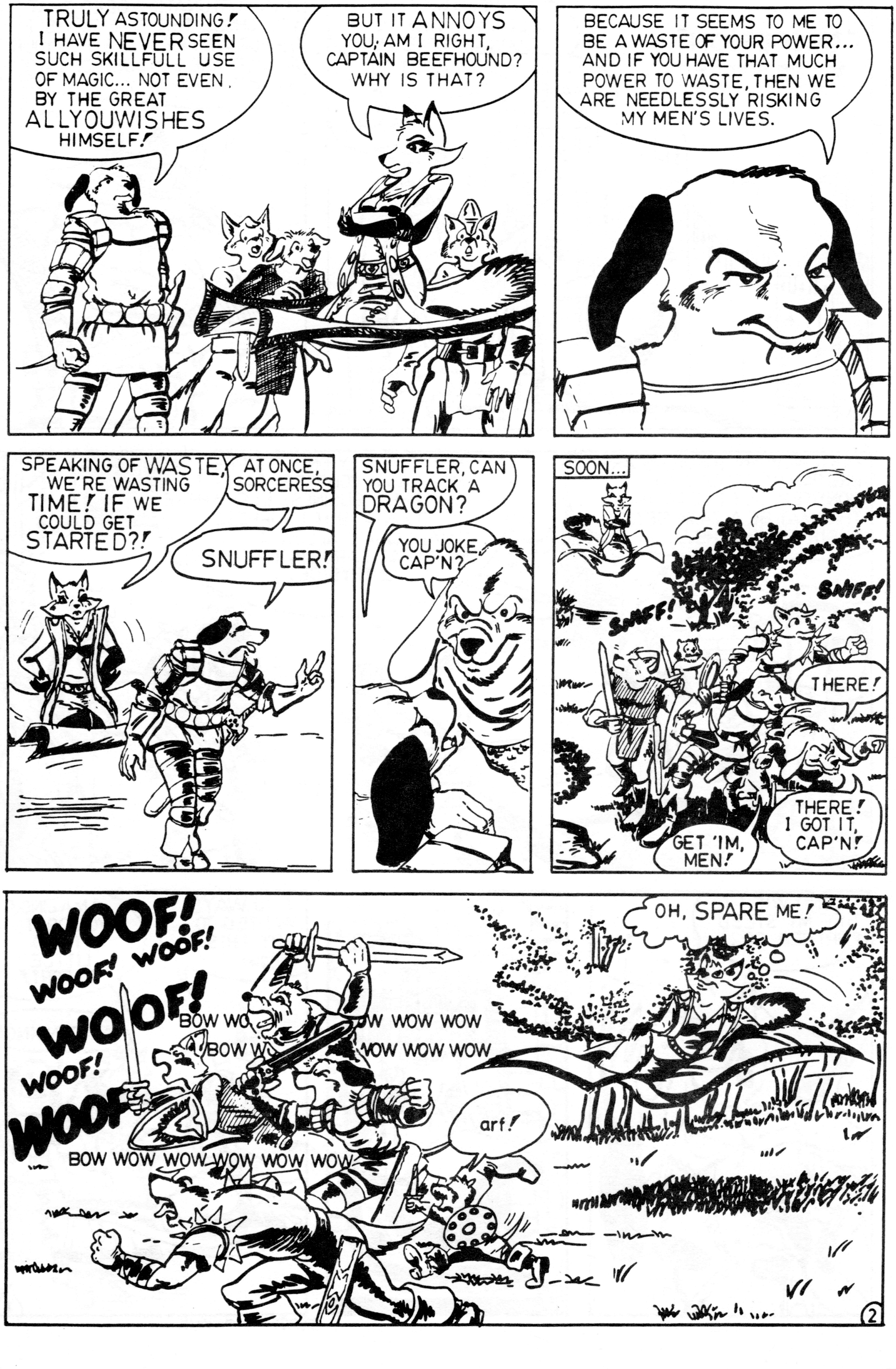
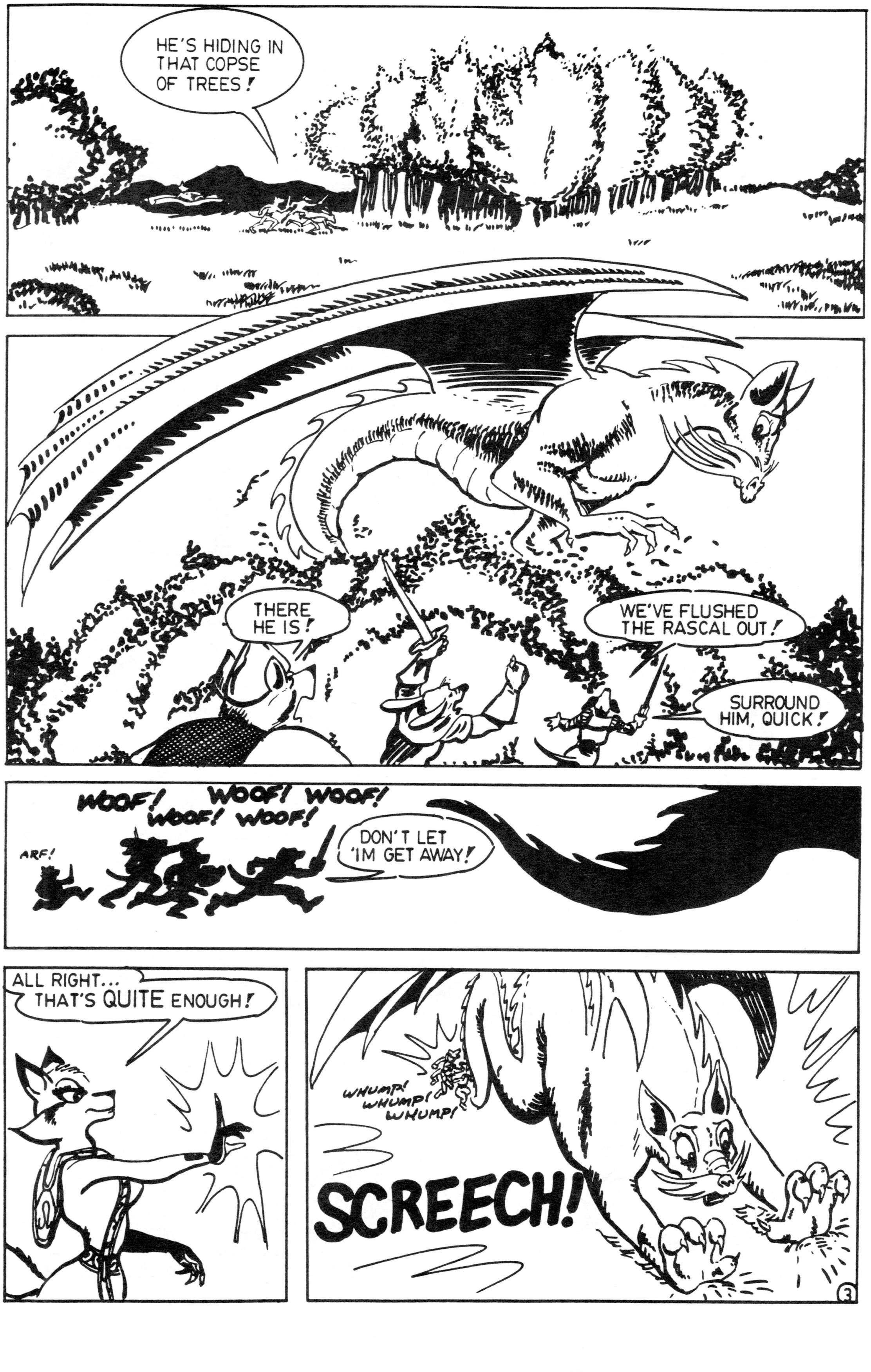
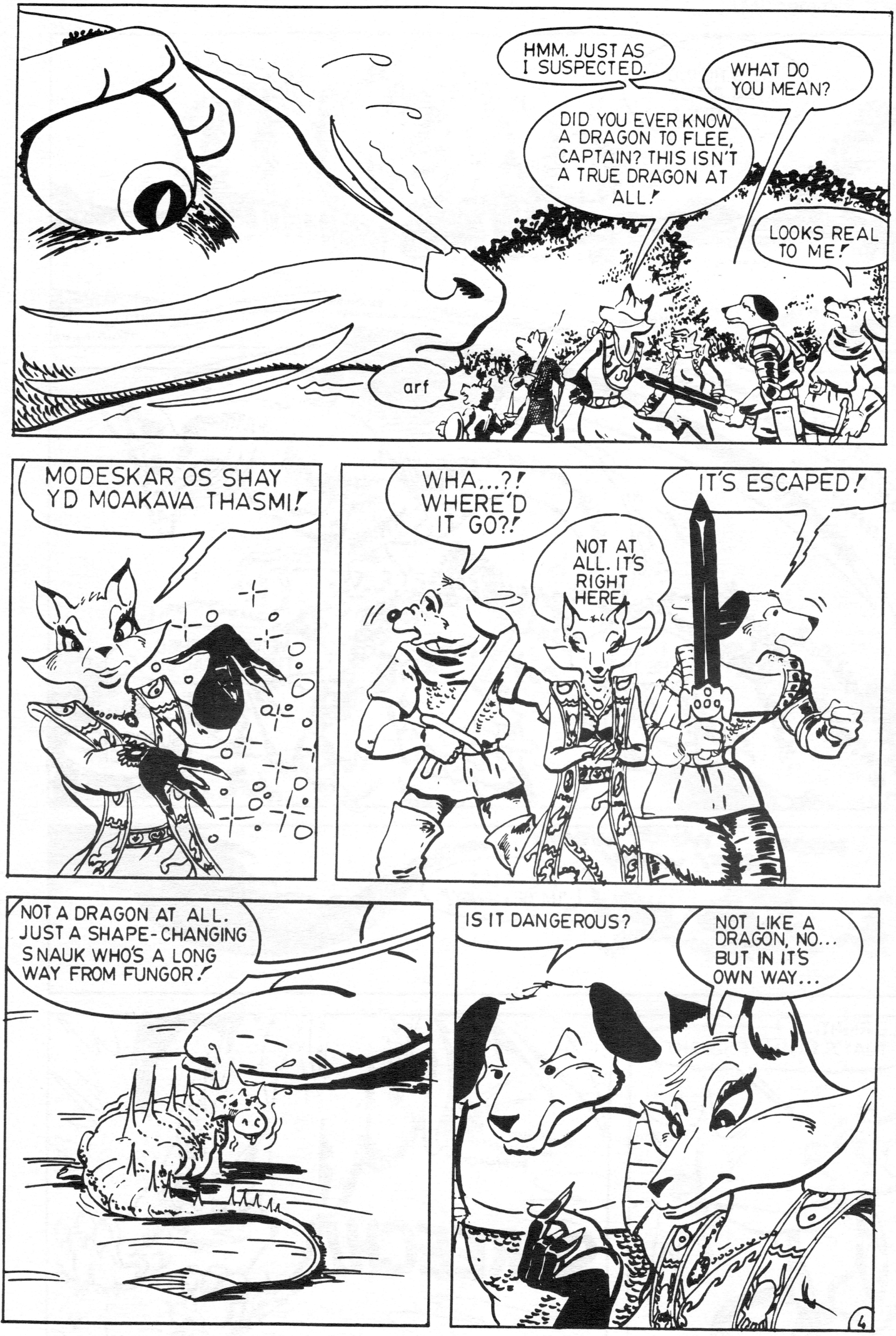
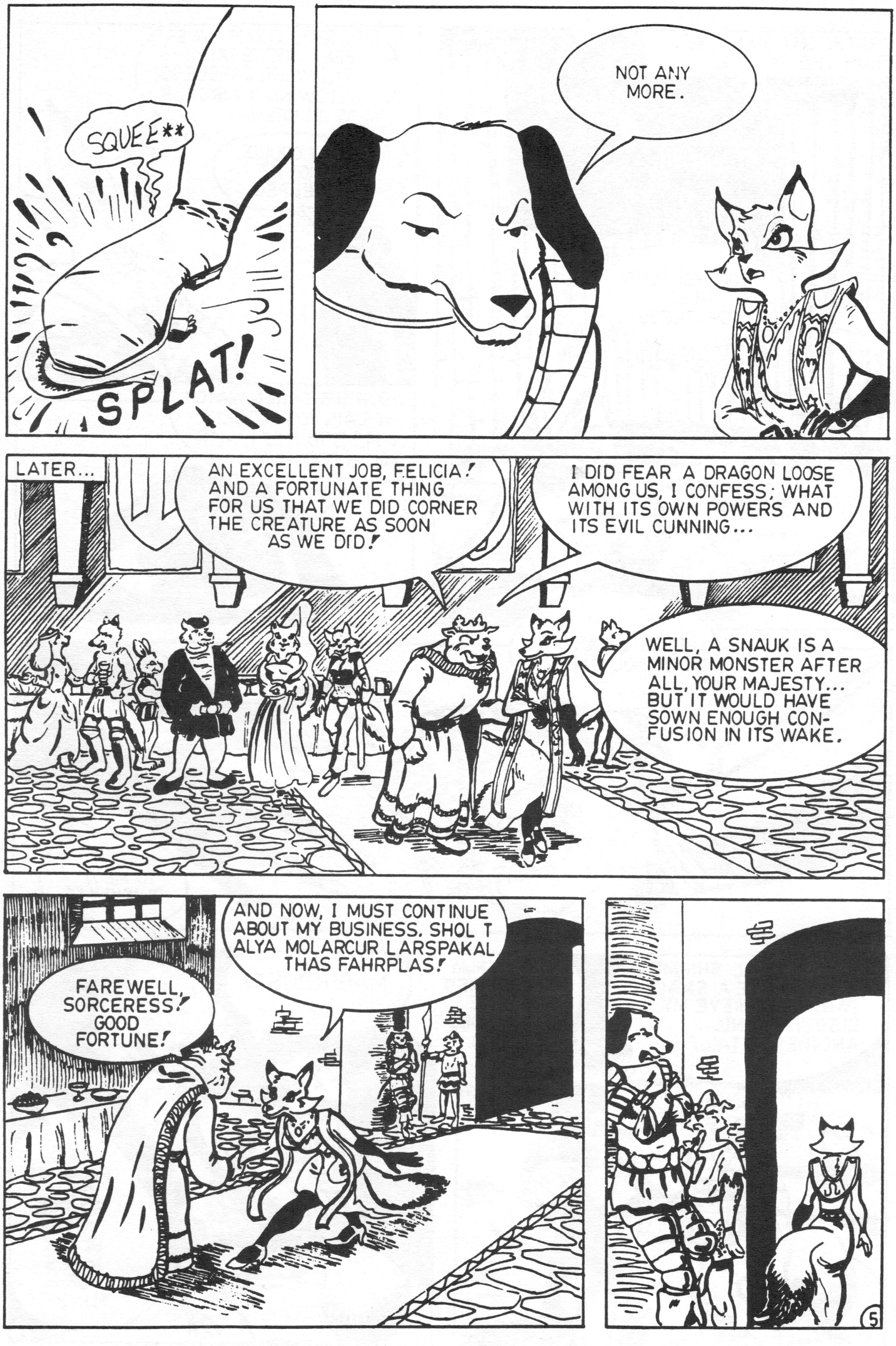

"DECEPTION"
by Chuck Melville
AH, WELCOME! WELCOME BACK TO DOGONIA, SORCERESS!
OH, PLEASE, YOUR MAJESTY; CALL ME FELICIA!
IF YOU WISH...
IT IS FORTUNATE INDEED THAT YOU CHOSE THIS TIME TO VISIT US, FOR WE ARE IN NEED OF YOUR AID. WE ARE PLAGUED OF LATE BY A DRAGON!
EVEN NOW MY SOLDIERS ARE PREPARING TO HUNT THE MONSTER, BUT I FEAR THAT THIS MAY BE A TASK BEYOND THEIR STRENGTHS!
MM. I REALLY ONLY STOPPED HERE AS A COURTESY CALL--I HAVE OTHER BUSINESS ELSEWHERE IN DOGONIA. BUT I SUPPOSE THAT I CAN'T ALLOW A DRAGON AT LARGE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE...
I DON'T WISH TO TIRE MY STEED FURTHER, SO...
GREAT ALN!
I ALWAYS WANTED TO TRY THIS! (giggle)
AMAZING! YOU DO IT WITH SO LITTLE EFFORT!
ASTOUNDING!
1

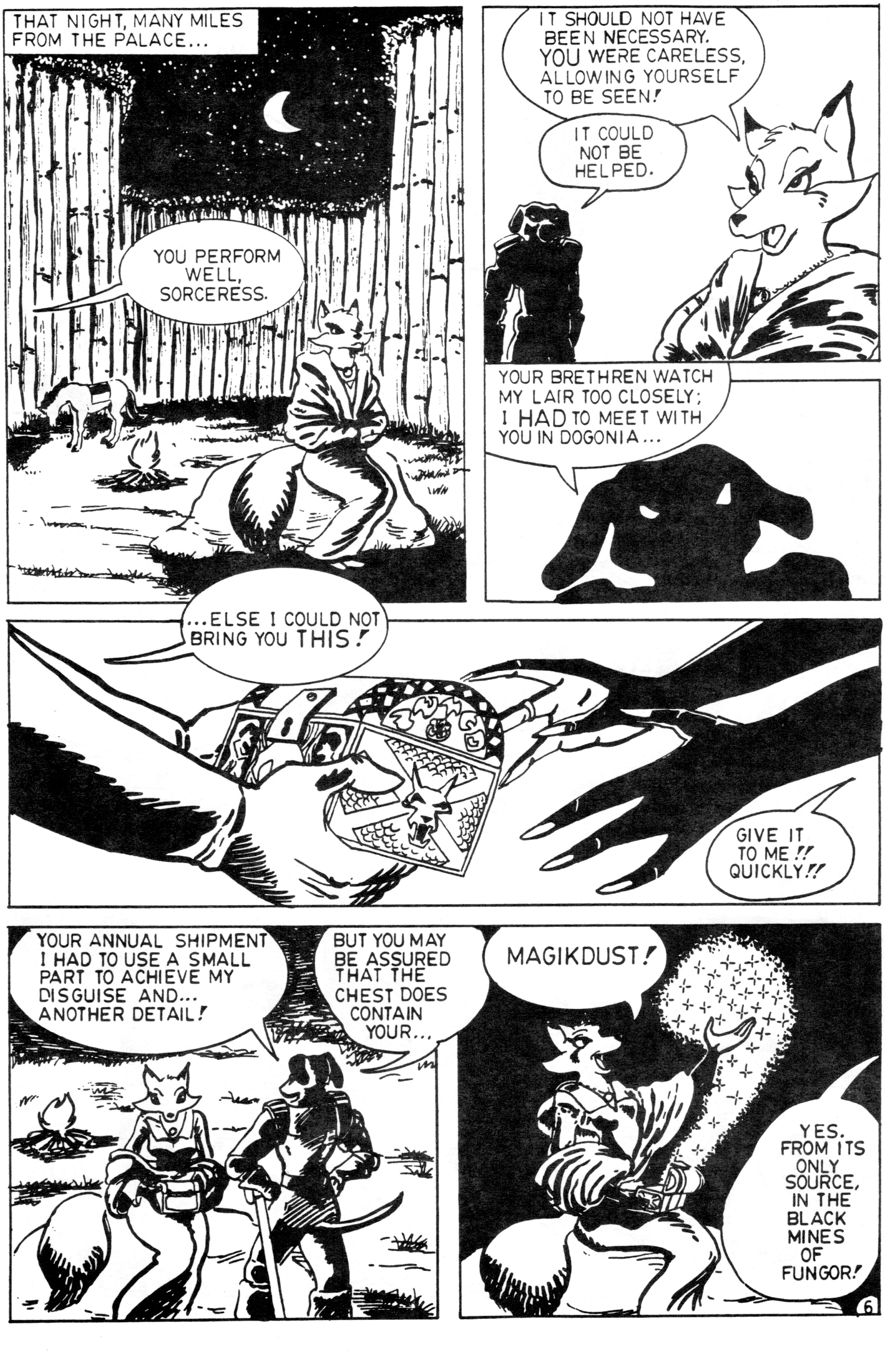
©[illegible] Chuck MELVILLE

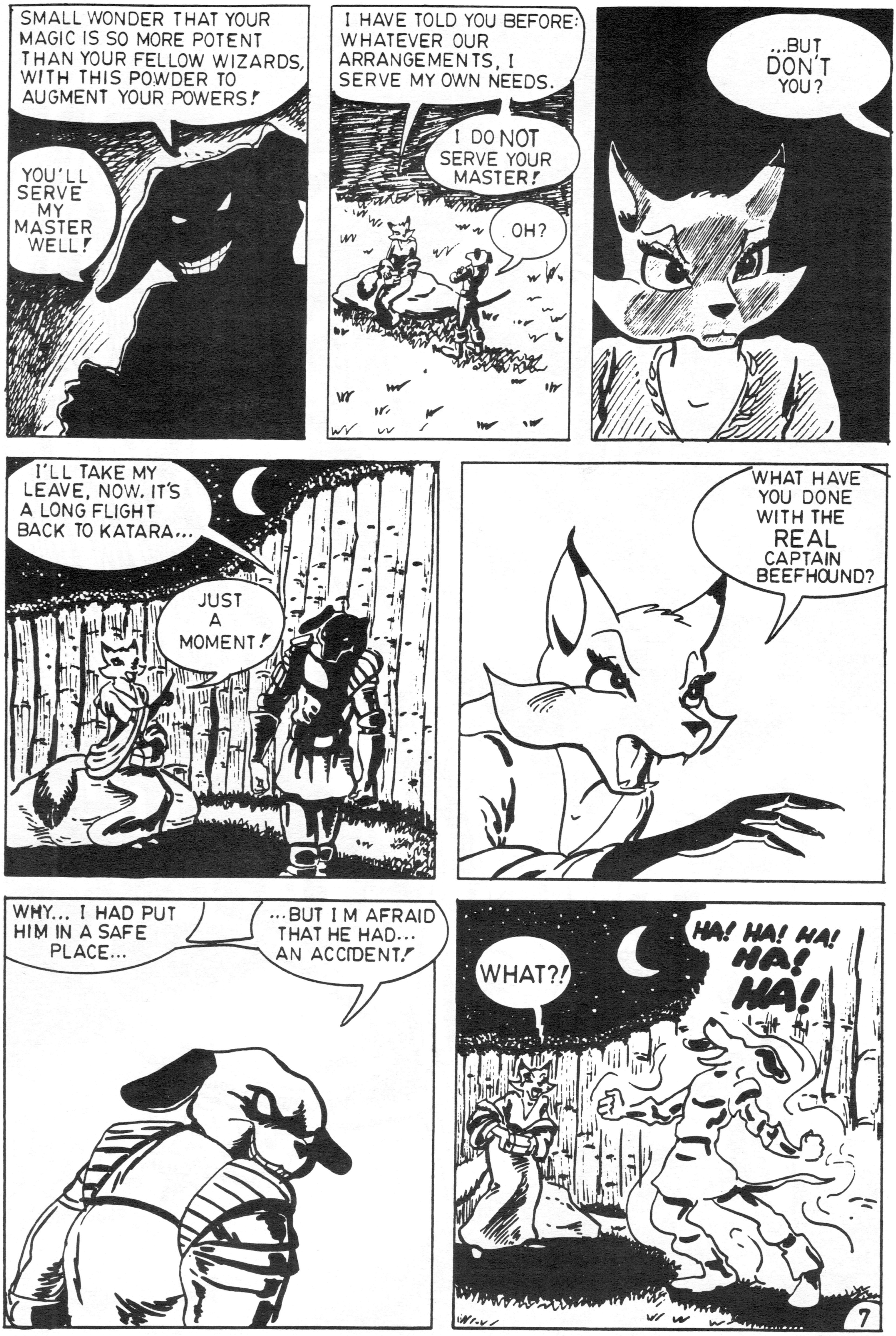

TRULY ASTOUNDING! I HAVE NEVER SEEN SUCH SKILLFULL USE OF MAGIC... NOT EVEN BY THE GREAT ALLYOUWISHES HIMSELF!
BUT IT ANNOYS YOU, AM I RIGHT, CAPTAIN BEEFHOUND? WHY IS THAT?
BECAUSE IT SEEMS TO ME TO BE A WASTE OF YOUR POWER... AND IF YOU HAVE THAT MUCH POWER TO WASTE, THEN WE ARE NEEDLESSLY RISKING MY MEN'S LIVES.
SPEAKING OF WASTE, WE'RE WASTING TIME! IF WE COULD GET STARTED?!
AT ONCE, SORCERESS
SNUFFLER!
SNUFFLER, CAN YOU TRACK A DRAGON?
YOU JOKE, CAP'N?
SOON...
SNIFF!
SNIFF!
THERE!
THERE! I GOT IT, CAP'N!
GET 'IM, MEN!
WOOF!
WOOF! WOOF!
WOOF!
WOOF!
WOOF
BOW WOW WOW WOW WOW
BOW WOW WOW WOW WOW
BOW WOW WOW WOW WOW WOW
OH, SPARE ME!
arf!
2

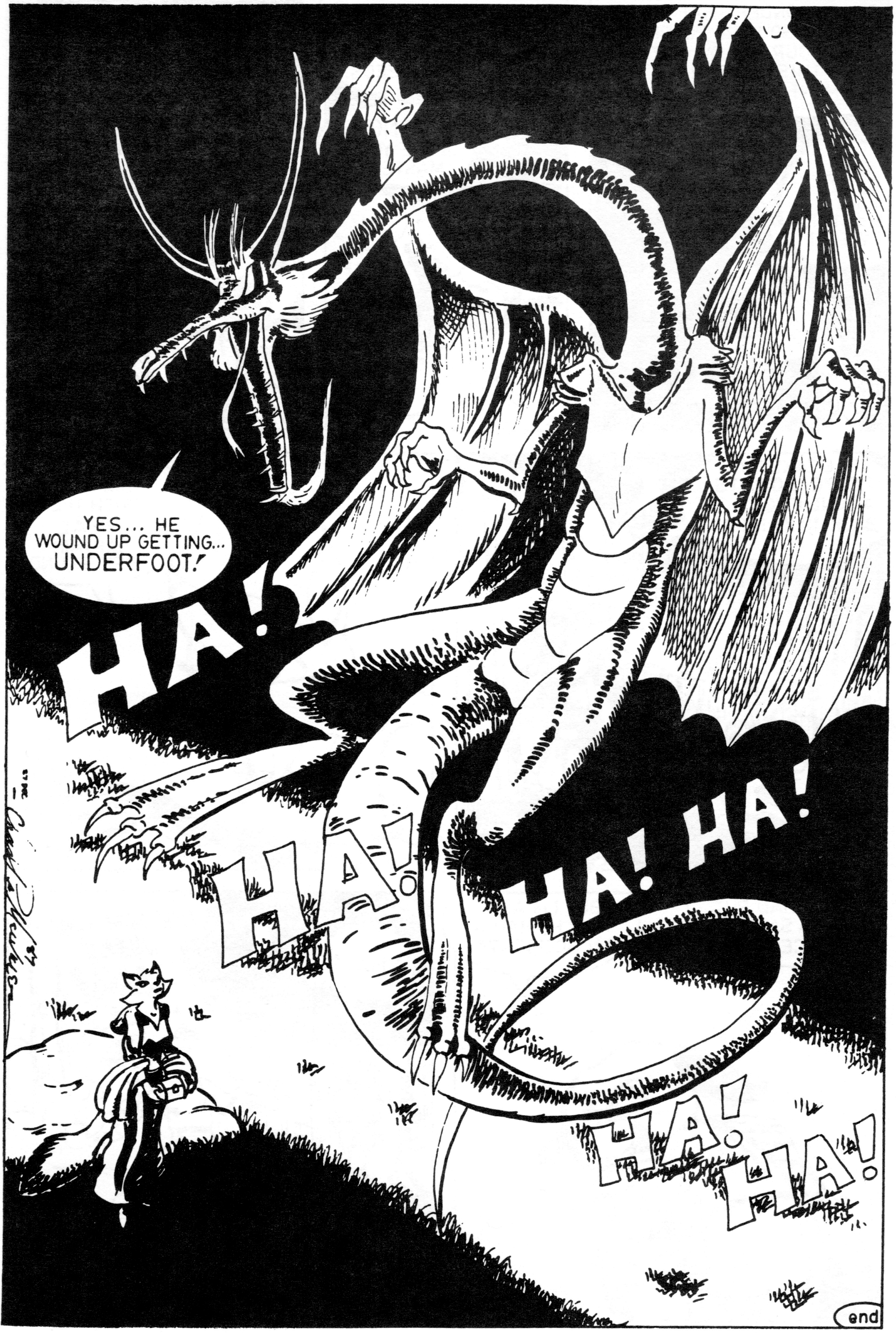

HE'S HIDING IN THAT COPSE OF TREES!
THERE HE IS!
WE'VE FLUSHED THE RASCAL OUT!
SURROUND HIM, QUICK!
WOOF! WOOF! WOOF!
WOOF! WOOF!
ARF!
DON'T LET 'IM GET AWAY!
ALL RIGHT... THAT'S QUITE ENOUGH!
WHUMP! WHUMP! WHUMP!
SCREECH!
3


HMM. JUST AS I SUSPECTED.
DID YOU EVER KNOW A DRAGON TO FLEE, CAPTAIN? THIS ISN'T A TRUE DRAGON AT ALL!
WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
LOOKS REAL TO ME!
arf
MODESKAR OS SHAY YD MOAKAVA THASMI!
WHA...?! WHERE'D IT GO?!
NOT AT ALL. IT'S RIGHT HERE.
IT'S ESCAPED!
NOT A DRAGON AT ALL. JUST A SHAPE-CHANGING SNAUK WHO'S A LONG WAY FROM FUNGOR!
IS IT DANGEROUS?
NOT LIKE A DRAGON, NO... BUT IN IT'S OWN WAY...
4


SQUEE**
SPLAT!
NOT ANY MORE.
LATER...
AN EXCELLENT JOB, FELICIA! AND A FORTUNATE THING FOR US THAT WE DID CORNER THE CREATURE AS SOON AS WE DID!
I DID FEAR A DRAGON LOOSE AMONG US, I CONFESS; WHAT WITH ITS OWN POWERS AND ITS EVIL CUNNING...
WELL, A SNAUK IS A MINOR MONSTER AFTER ALL, YOUR MAJESTY... BUT IT WOULD HAVE SOWN ENOUGH CONFUSION IN ITS WAKE.
AND NOW, I MUST CONTINUE ABOUT MY BUSINESS. SHOL T ALYA MOLARCUR LARSPAKAL THAS FAHRPLAS!
FAREWELL, SORCERESS! GOOD FORTUNE!
5


THAT NIGHT, MANY MILES FROM THE PALACE...
YOU PERFORM WELL, SORCERESS.
IT SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN NECESSARY. YOU WERE CARELESS, ALLOWING YOURSELF TO BE SEEN!
IT COULD NOT BE HELPED.
YOUR BRETHREN WATCH MY LAIR TOO CLOSELY; I HAD TO MEET WITH YOU IN DOGONIA...
...ELSE I COULD NOT BRING YOU THIS!
GIVE IT TO ME!! QUICKLY!!
YOUR ANNUAL SHIPMENT I HAD TO USE A SMALL PART TO ACHIEVE MY DISGUISE AND... ANOTHER DETAIL!
BUT YOU MAY BE ASSURED THAT THE CHEST DOES CONTAIN YOUR...
MAGIKDUST!
YES. FROM ITS ONLY SOURCE, IN THE BLACK MINES OF FUNGOR!
6


SMALL WONDER THAT YOUR MAGIC IS SO MORE POTENT THAN YOUR FELLOW WIZARDS, WITH THIS POWDER TO AUGMENT YOUR POWERS!
YOU'LL SERVE MY MASTER WELL!
I HAVE TOLD YOU BEFORE: WHATEVER OUR ARRANGEMENTS, I SERVE MY OWN NEEDS.
I DO NOT SERVE YOUR MASTER!
OH?
...BUT DON'T YOU?
I'LL TAKE MY LEAVE, NOW. IT'S A LONG FLIGHT BACK TO KATARA...
JUST A MOMENT!
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH THE REAL CAPTAIN BEEFHOUND?
WHY... I HAD PUT HIM IN A SAFE PLACE...
...BUT I M AFRAID THAT HE HAD... AN ACCIDENT!
WHAT?!
HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!
7


YES... HE WOUND UP GETTING... UNDERFOOT!
HA!
HA!
HA! HA!
HA!
HA!
end

OVERHEARD

From: TURTLE To: BEATLE
Date: 06/25/90
Subj: Star Trek: Next Generation

Next season's Star Trek lineup: Riker is commander of the Enterprise, the nasty, bad-tempered young lady is his first officer, and Decks 6 through 16 of the saucer are uninhabitable due to radiation contamination incurred during the battle with the Rubik's Cube of Doom. Picard is floating space-dust; the only thing left of him is the Neat-O laser the Borg grafted for unknown reasons to the side of his face as a special effect. Wesley has it out with Riker, ends up in bed with Troi, and dies a week later of acute embarrassment when someone beats him to the punch and saves the Enterprise before he does. Meanwhile, the Weekly Galaxy News reports that a party of Denubians saw the ghost of Captain Kirk in a "Circle K" near the frozen foods, and that he was last seen running off through the ionosphere with the ghost of Elvis and a "weird green chick."

That bloody ozone... we need to get a seamstress up there to sew up those holes before all intelligent life leaks out into space. -- Jo Davidsmeyer

Beating around the bush only gets you sorry-looking shrubbery.
-- Chris Grant

I'm trying to share my soul with you, and all I'm getting are Norwegian hunting songs. -- Barbara Cox, after watching an episode of "Twin Peaks"

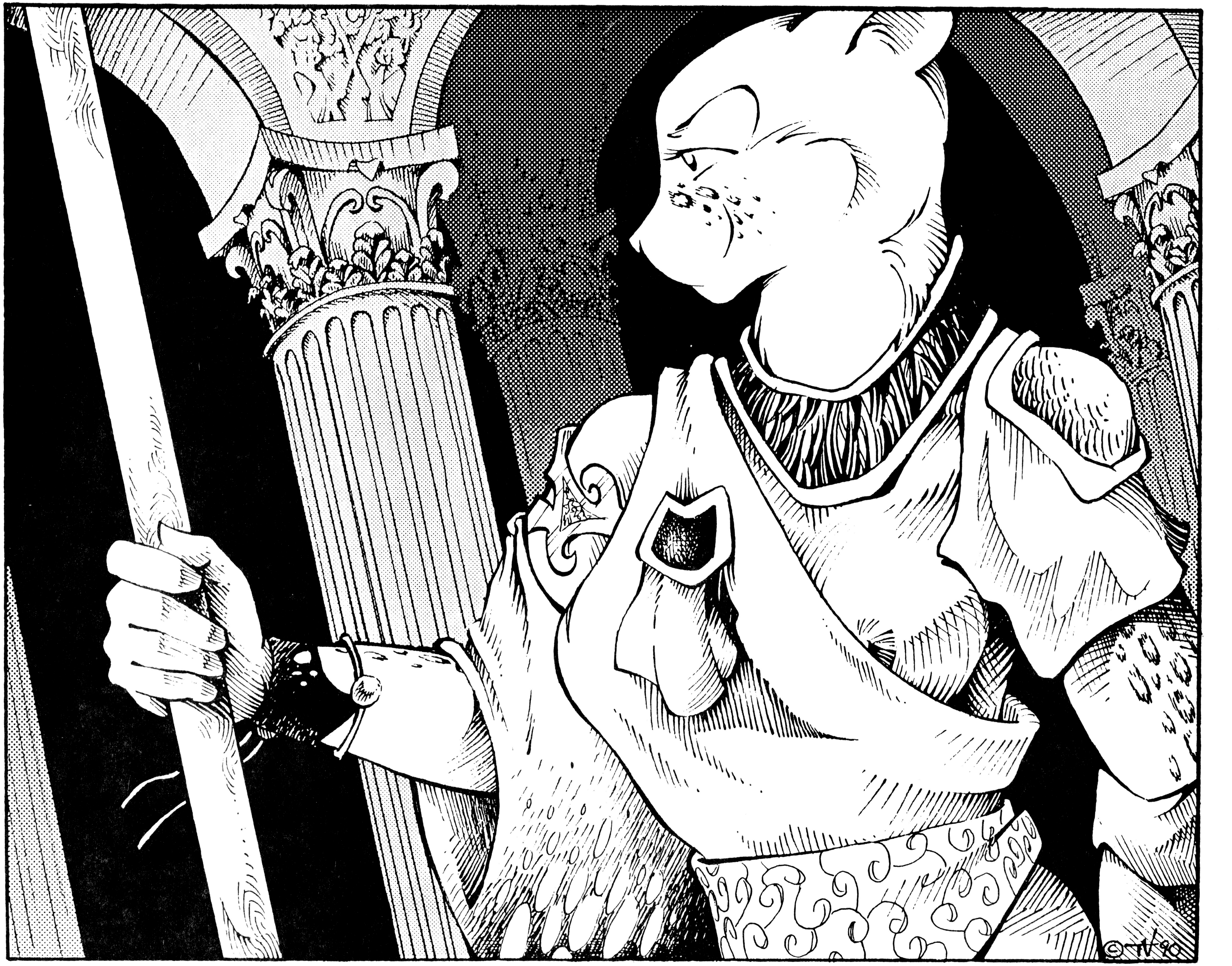
Given the proper element of surprise, a goldfish can beat the hell out of a gorilla. -- Alan J. Flory

Lack of sleep has a predictable effect on me. I get sleepy. -- Ed Pegg, Jr.

One of the producers of "Akira" was Bandai Toys. Does this mean that there's an Akira action figure--press the button and he blows up your house?
-- Anonymous

IBM manual: "The following is a heretofore undocumented feature." English translation: "It's a bug, it's our fault and there isn't a damn thing you can do about it."

Animal rights activist Richard O'Barry, head of the Miami-based Dolphin Project, said the Navy's dolphin nose-gun program posed three basic concerns: It could harm the dolphins, it could harm innocent divers, and dolphins do not make effective assault weapons because they are playful and non-aggressive creatures. -- Associated Press



Of the Father, Upon the Son

Kevin Higgins

"Last night you seemed much less the lad with no hope," Sheila chided Jeyn. Sitting on his right, despite the lack of light, she could see the blue veins on the inside of his wrist as he rolled the hand beneath idle scrutiny. Her comment brought only a fleeting smile, and that without the flush she had distantly hoped would suffuse his pouting features.

She loved it when men blushed, when the blood rushed to their faces, turning them crimson. Jeyn's father had not blushed. The memory brought a flaring rage. She concealed it, even as she realized that Jeyn had led her to a bridge very like the one on which she had been raped under the chill rains of last fall.

"There's no way I'll ever get out of here." Jeyn slumped back against the bridge's railing. He studied the palm of his left hand as if it might somehow conceal the means to alter his fate.

He snaked his arm around her small shoulders. Her heart thumped as he pulled her in close. With shallow breaths and a tautening in her belly, she nestled her head under his jaw, snuggling up against the softness of his never-shaven skin. They had only met last night, but some intimacies come faster than others.

And that was fine with her. She had, in fact, expected it. Two nights among the shadows, watching him among friends, had shown her that he tended to change spirits easily. She needed that. Moody people were always more chaotic, more likely to commit to something new.

"Thank you."

She smiled and wormed her way a little closer. That she didn't ask, "For what?" she knew he would take as confirmation of the sense of communion young lovers were supposed to share.

Though they were far above the marshes of lower Mueglar, the night air was still and the smell of the surrounding swamps wafted up on sluggishly eddying currents. The heavy odor of decay and the throat-filling weight of rotting garbage surrounded them briefly, then left again. On nights like this even the very rich—who could afford to live high above the chaotic flooding and the vile smells of the island-studded swamp upon which the city was built—were occasionally reminded of Mueglar's nastier side. The reminder drew another sigh from Jeyn. Sheila felt his dissatisfaction and hugged him sympathetically.

"Tell me a story," she urged him, taking his hand, hoping to ease him into a better frame of mind.

His brows dipped briefly and he hesitated through yet another sigh. At the precise point in time when his decision might have gone either way, she placed her palm, warm in the night's coolness, lightly on his thigh. Their relationship was new enough that that alone killed any chance of his refusing her.

"A funny one," she amended, bringing about a lightening of his mood.

With a wry smile—how could he resist?—he half turned toward her. Thinking a moment, he began.

She wriggled closer as he spun the tale, distracting him for a sentence or two. Scant moments into the yarn, she realized she had heard it from another boy not more than a week ago. It didn't matter, and she was careful to smile in all the places the story demanded.

The end left her laughing, for the first time with her face open to him.

Even in the dark, she saw him pale, felt him withdraw and sensed his breath catch. His eyes widened, as she had known they would.

He clutched at her arm. "Your teeth," he whispered. She tensed for the realization to spark into his mind: *'neather!* But his family was so affluent that the thought he might be cavorting with someone from the lowest rung of the Muegłaria ladder never entered his mind.

She smiled uncertainly, holding it until he swore: "You're a vampire!" Surprise replaced her self-conscious smile, not at his charge, but at the implication it carried; because 'neathers, the humans and sub-humans who lived beneath the swamps in the Barrows below south-eastern Mueglar, weren't a part of his upper-caste world, the fantastic had occurred to him instead.

"Don't be a fool." Her smile faded. "There're no such things." She shuddered, making it easily visible. "Don't even talk about it." She frowned prettily, putting forth just enough of a pout to edge him towards the defensive.

He shook his head. "But your teeth... How could I not have noticed before?"

"I never let you see them." She lowered her gaze.

"Then you are a vampire!"

"No, I'm not. Stop it!" She pulled away from him. He stopped her before she could draw entirely out of his reach, as she had known he would. "You're mistaken..." He missed completely the underlying huskiness to her voice and couldn't have understood its meaning if he had detected it. She checked her withdrawal just before breaking his grip. "I should never have let you...." A sniffle punctuated her failing protest.

His grip on her arms tightened. His eyes were bright in the darkness. "Don't you understand? It's not bad, it's good!" She looked up at him. His eyes burned fervently. "I've dreamed of something like this! There'd be no stopping me. I—we—could go wherever we wanted. Hunters...." He tasted the word, obviously liking it.

Her struggle, half-hearted, got her nowhere. It was because she loved; her strength, greater than his, was not hers to exercise. "But I'm not a vampire!" She cried it out, but didn't look him in the eye while she did. Even to her ears it sounded false. There was no way he would believe.

"Sheila," he soothed her. "Just think, we could go anywhere. I'd never grow old. What we've found need never die."

She realized that in his youth, with its accompanying emotional instability, he was convinced that there was love between them. Overcome by his excitement, he jumped to his feet, bringing her with him. He forced her to look at him.

Even in the dark, she saw him pale, felt him withdraw and sensed his breath catch. His eyes widened, as she had known they would. "You're a vampire!"

The time to protest was past. Silent now, she watched him, a small creasing between her eyebrows her only expression.

"You love me," he said. It was less a revelation or a question than a statement. A tear formed in the corner of her eye. Gently he wiped it away with his thumb. "And I love you. I knew it from the moment our eyes met, Sheila." She restrained the emotion the words brought. She let drop another tear and it too was wiped tenderly away.

"It's not what you...." Her protest trailed off into the night's swirling mistiness. She seemed unable to complete a thought anymore. The need to convince was unnecessary now anyway.

"I want to be like you." His voice, soft, shook with intensity. She looked up at him. "I'm yours, Sheila." He took a half-step forward. "Make me one of you." He swallowed nervously, despite his professed eagerness. "Make me a vampire. I love you." He raised his chin, kept his eyes on her unblinkingly through her hesitation.

His throat, Adam's apple prominently visible, gleamed palely in the diffuse moonlight.

Sheila looked around. The bridge on which they had stopped, swathed in marsh-mist, was empty. Slowly, very slowly, moving into his trembling embrace, she brought her hand up and let it settle feather-light on his nape. Her other arm moved between them and she produced a short, thick wooden dowel.

"Bite on this," she commanded, her demeanor changing Sheepish, he did as she said.

He closed his eyes as she pressed her body's length against his. Teasing, her tongue flicked hot against the side of his neck. Even in the dark she could see the slight pulsing of the artery.

A savage movement and it was done. Startled, his eyes flashed open. His abdomen stiffened under her steadying hand and a shrill, muffled scream, almost a sound of pleasure, sounded around the dowel. Warmth ran down her chin before she could pull away. In a curious stop flash, she saw with preternatural clarity that his teeth had sunk deep into the wooden dowel.

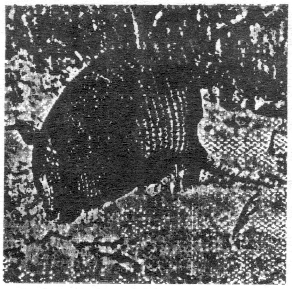
Hot wetness pulsed from his savaged throat and dripped onto her right hand. After wiping it against his shirt, she drew his finely jeweled dagger from his belt.

"There are no such things as vampires, Jeyn," she whispered to his staring eyes as the life faded from their injured depths. His body, unsupported by either her teeth or his will, dropped to the bridge's rough stone walkway.

Moments later, the best cuts swinging heavily within a bag slung over her shoulder, she headed back towards the Barrows. His remains, pushed over the railing, were already being disposed of by the ever-present, scaled and voracious slengaro that hunted the swamps in and around Mueglar.

Nought grew in the Barrow's eternal darkness. And while few people ever thought about the results of a young 'neathergirl's rape, she knew even fewer would consider that Jeyn's disappearance was an extension of underworld justice. Her litter had to eat, just like anyone's. In his own way, Jeyn's father had turned out to be a pretty good provider.

A brightly whistled tune floated in the wake of her passing. ❑



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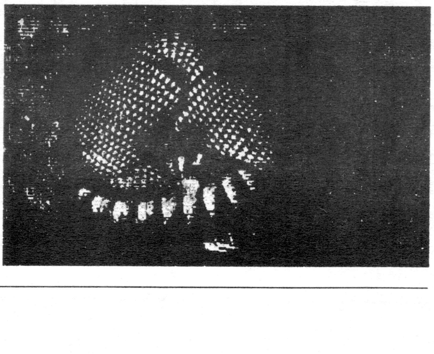

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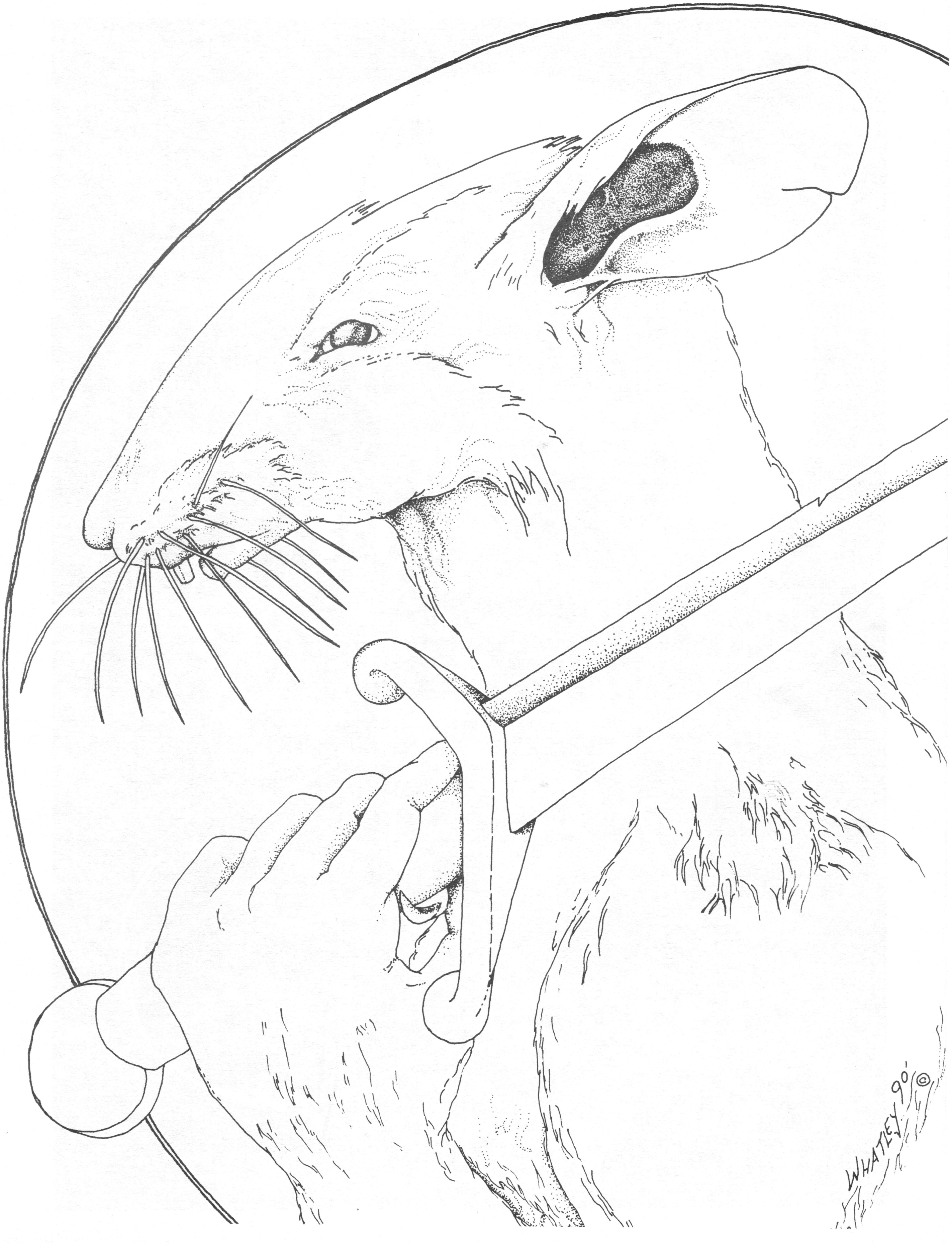
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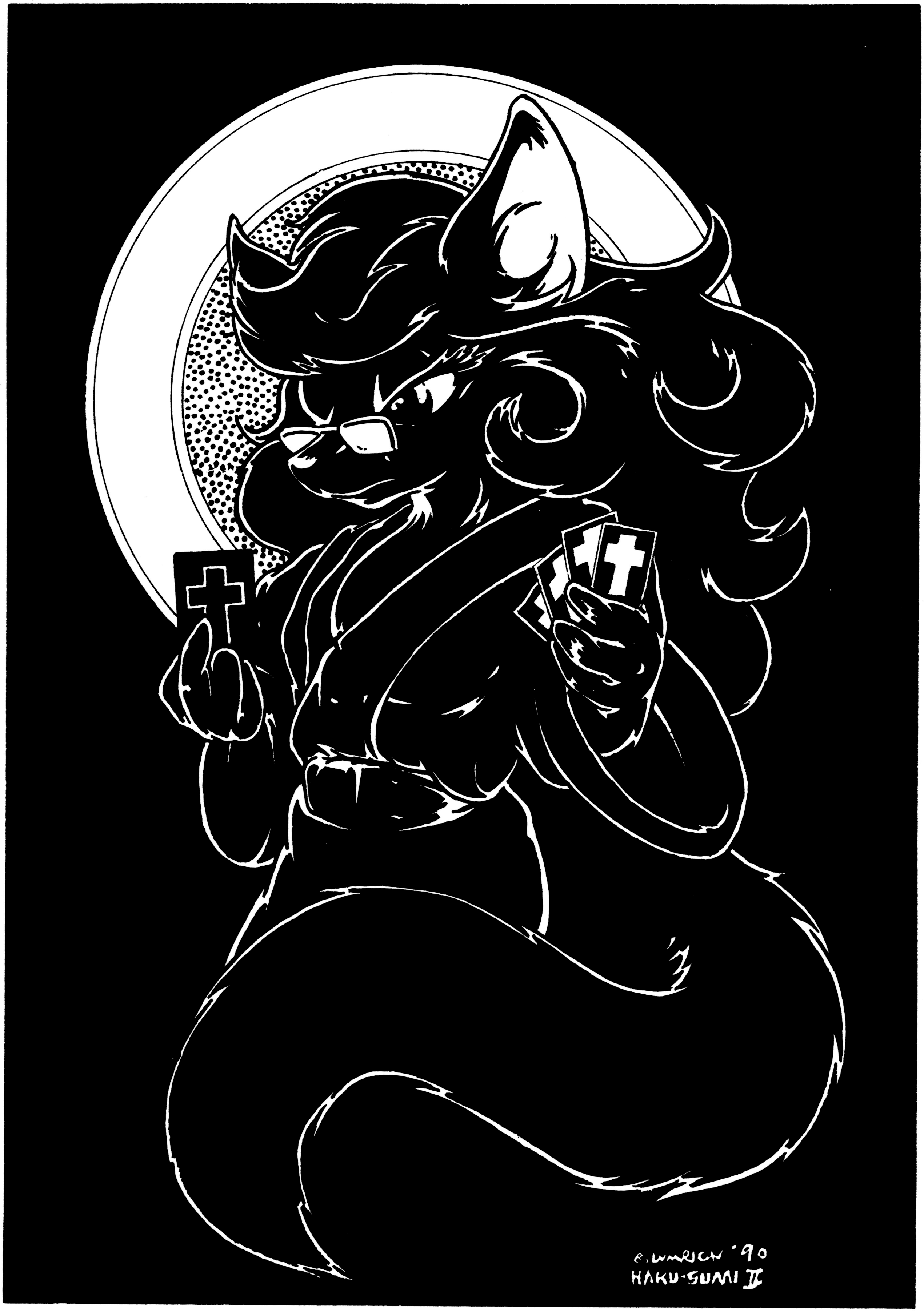

E. WMRICH '90
HAKU-SUMI II

Of Storm and Furry

Lawrence Schoen

Chapter 1: Petals and Vents

> In all my time on Barsk, I have never known a dry day. To us, the rain is a philosophical metaphor. While the individual storms may vary in their intensity, there is always rain. Much like the mountains, valleys and other geologic structures of *your* world, the rain is an enduring (even endearing) constant to us. And yet, one must also realize that it is never the same rain twice. While the flora and fauna of Barsk may come and go, each in its own cycles, the rain knows no such patterns. There is a dynamism in our weather which belies its sameness. Our grandmothers express this best with the popular saying, "*rain teaches us tenacity*." I've yet to meet an offworlder who understands what that means.
>
> — Jorl ben Tral, *An Insider's Outside View of Barsk*

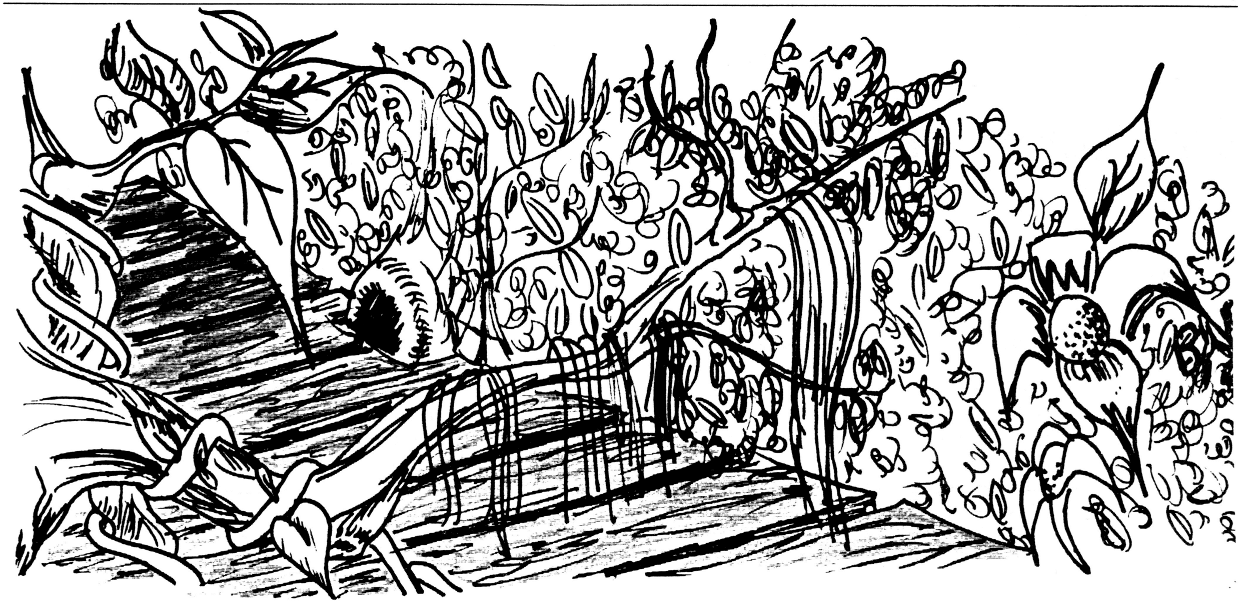
Despite the inevitable mist, the ℵ was clearly visible. Jorl knew that even here in the lower upper lower reaches of the canopy the wispy glow of the aleph marked his position. The bioluminescent tattoo on his forehead seemed almost to pulse, though he knew it was a trick of the thinning and thickening fog. Two years ago (two *Barsk* years, he reminded himself) when his people had first marked him, he'd been incredibly self-conscious. Constantly straining his eyes to see what others couldn't help but see, pondering how he should act, wondering what people thought of him, suddenly awkward and clumsy and foolish. Thankfully, he'd gotten over that period fairly soon. He'd thought of how the other alephs must have dealt with it, but, he'd never met one, and so it was all speculation. In all the vast eight hundred years of life on Barsk, Jorl was only the 57th to wear the aleph. He was one of three such Fant currently living.

It wasn't that Jorl was a great hero; nor was he a despicable villain. He was not a celebrity or a politician or even a parent. The bearing of the aleph granted neither fame nor power nor wealth unto its wearer; it granted passage. Jorl could go anywhere, open any door, look into any home. He was free to access any information, ask any question, seek any answer. Indeed, he was encouraged to do so. Of course, he still had to exist within the parameters of Barsk society, and that meant bearing the responsibilities and obligations of any other citizen. Even so, he tried not to let it get in his way.

Jorl trundled along the lul corridor, blithely snatching the occasional Hsinad petal with a deft gather, close, twist of his trunk's nubs. He dropped the fragile azure petals into the sack cinched about his waist, as effortlessly as breathing. Jorl rolled a small gob of Taww gum between tongue and palate as he worked. An extravagant luxury elsewhere in the Alliance, the gum was a major export of Barsk and cost no more than the time it took to locate one of the plentiful Taww plants, break off a twig, and suck the gummy sap from its length. In its raw form Taww was a mild psychical euphoric, putting the user in empathic contact with surrounding lower life forms. On Barsk that meant that Jorl was buoyed up by the feeling of jubilant life from all the vegetation in the canopy, with just a hint of majesty of the trees below. How the Taww gum worked on other worlds was a minor topic of speculation and the stuff of children's stories.

As he continued along, he wandered through his own thoughts and memories, punctuated by the hushed mental gasp of delight from each petal he plucked. The simplicity of the afternoon's work amused him, ironically so as he was one of the few Fant to ever leave Barsk and encounter the complex machinations of living among the other races of the Alliance. His stint in the Patrol had exploded his shallow parochial view, introducing him to wonders and horrors which his siblings simply couldn't begin to understand. In the center of it all was the great paradox, that of all the races and types of xenos in the Alliance the Fant were viewed with a blend of loathing, distrust, suspicion, and amusement by almost all the rest. And the reasons were obvious: their skins and their trunks. While virtually all the races in the Alliance were bipedal, bimanual, air-breathing mammals, they were also furry. Short or long, coarse or silky, they were furry. The Fant were not. Where the other races had hair, they had thick wrinkled, hairless hide. Depending on the furred race, the reaction to a Fant's *baldness* ranged from a polite embarrassment to an abomination. And then of course there was the matter of the trunks. It wasn't enough to have an extra appendage where most of the other races chose to keep a really silly excuse for a nose, but to have that appendage be prehensile and a better tool manipulator than what most had for hands was unacceptable. One of the first lessons that Jorl had learned in the Patrol was to keep his trunk to himself. The second had been to wear as much clothing as possible, usually far more than he found comfortable, yet still far less than some would have preferred.

Jorl could only smile at the thought of his old comrades' reactions could they only see him now. Skipping along in little more than his tool-belt and gathering sack, delicately plucking petals with his trunk. It made a lot more sense than bundling himself in synthetics and only using his hands. At least, it made Fant sense. But then, no other xeno would find the prospect of racing along sodden planks of hard wood a pleasurable experience. More the pity for them, he thought. Out here



on the periphery of the lul Jorl could feel the slick boardway beneath his feet bowing slightly, but it always did that and Jorl hardly noticed. He'd been coming this way, picking Hsinad petals for first Farthna and then Tolta, since he was no bigger than an ear. The color spattered green of the lul canopy was dense about him, scarcely any gap save for the space of the boardway's corridor. Jorl proceeded, board to board, gathering more petals, until he came to a vertical hole in the foliage.

He then paused, as he always did, glancing first down and then up the length of the shaft. As he always did, Jorl took a small walnt pebble and released it into the shaft. After many dits he was rewarded by a small splashing sound. A good many dits. Gazing up again, cautiously leaning out a bit, Jorl could make out the tiniest glint of blue gray. The sky, most assuredly, the sky.

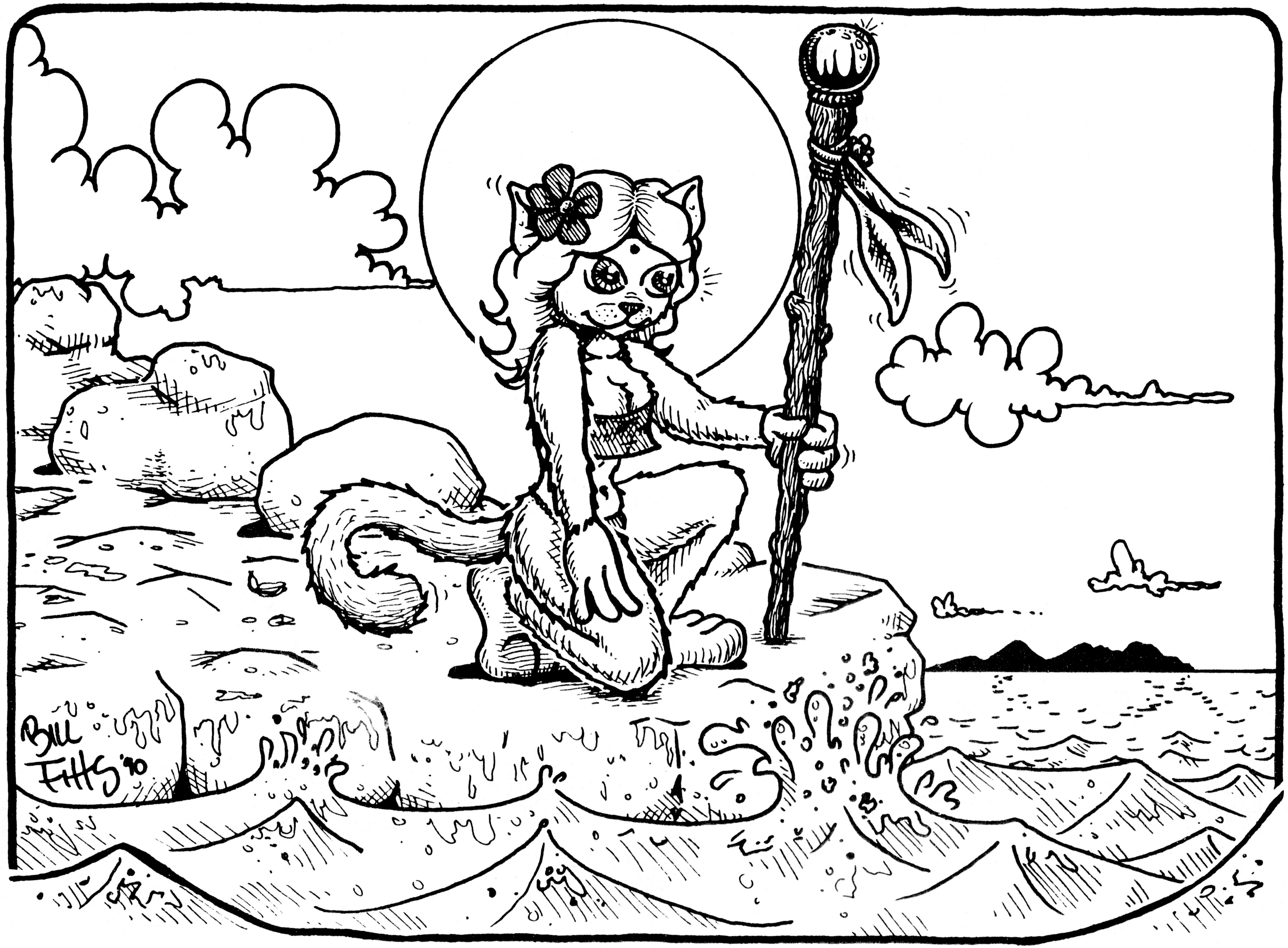
There were very few shafts such as this one, vents from the outer edge of the canopy all the way through to the civilized wood, and still further past the shadow dwell and into the water and roots of life. They didn't occur naturally; in fact, they were tremendously difficult to maintain, the airway forming a natural conduit for the transfer of any number of seedlings, pollens, and molds, all eager for a place to root and grow. They were maintained as insubstantial monuments, both as as memorials and as warnings. This particular one was named "Arlo's Chimney."

While virtually all the races in the Alliance were mammals, they were also furry. Short or long, coarse or silky, they were furry. The Fant were not.

As children, Arlo had been Jorl's best friend in the world. Together they had learned to write, to cipher, to carve, and to distill. While adulthood had pulled them in different directions, Jorl to history and Arlo into botany, they had had managed to remain close. Jorl had been Second at Arlo's bonding with Tolta (indeed, Jorl had introduced them!), and had likewise been Second at his Planting, four days after the prescribed time; it had taken that long to find and prepare the body.

Arlo had been a pharmer, easily one of the best at harvesting new strains for their pharmacological secrets. He had been about to make a breakthrough in a new strain of refined Taww. Maybe he did. Maybe he'd succeeded too well. In all likelihood he'd tried it first on himself, with unpredicted results. Something had gone terribly wrong, and he had climbed beyond the corridors of the uuu, to the uppermost edge of the canopy. At some point he must have smeared himself with the volatile juice of the Vlarj leaf, and then thrown himself high into the wind and rain of the storm, up into the oxygen rich envelope that hugged the canopy. In all likelihood he would have immolated at once. As gravity pulled him back, he would have entered the green as an immense fireball, burning a path all the way down, all the way through. Of course he was dead instantly. Vlarj juice was typically used for immediate vaporization of small botanical samples, not on living flesh. By the time he had been found much of him had been burned away, the rest shattered by the final impact, leaving his body an unrecognizable charred pulp. Whatever hints a coroner might have discovered about the new strain of Taww were totally illegible. This, perhaps, was as Arlo had intended.

As he always did when he happened upon the vent, Jorl pondered his friend's fate and the different directions his own life had taken. He wondered, not for the first time, if the outcome might not have been different had he not been far away on some alien world. Jorl knew his thoughts were pointless, but they danced within his brain all the same. Fanning himself with his right ear Jorl shivered, breaking the spell of the moment. He would have liked to have taken a time to chat with Arlo again, but his sack was almost full, and Tolta would be wanting the petals for the evening's must. With a wistful glance over his shoulder, he moved on down the boardway. ❑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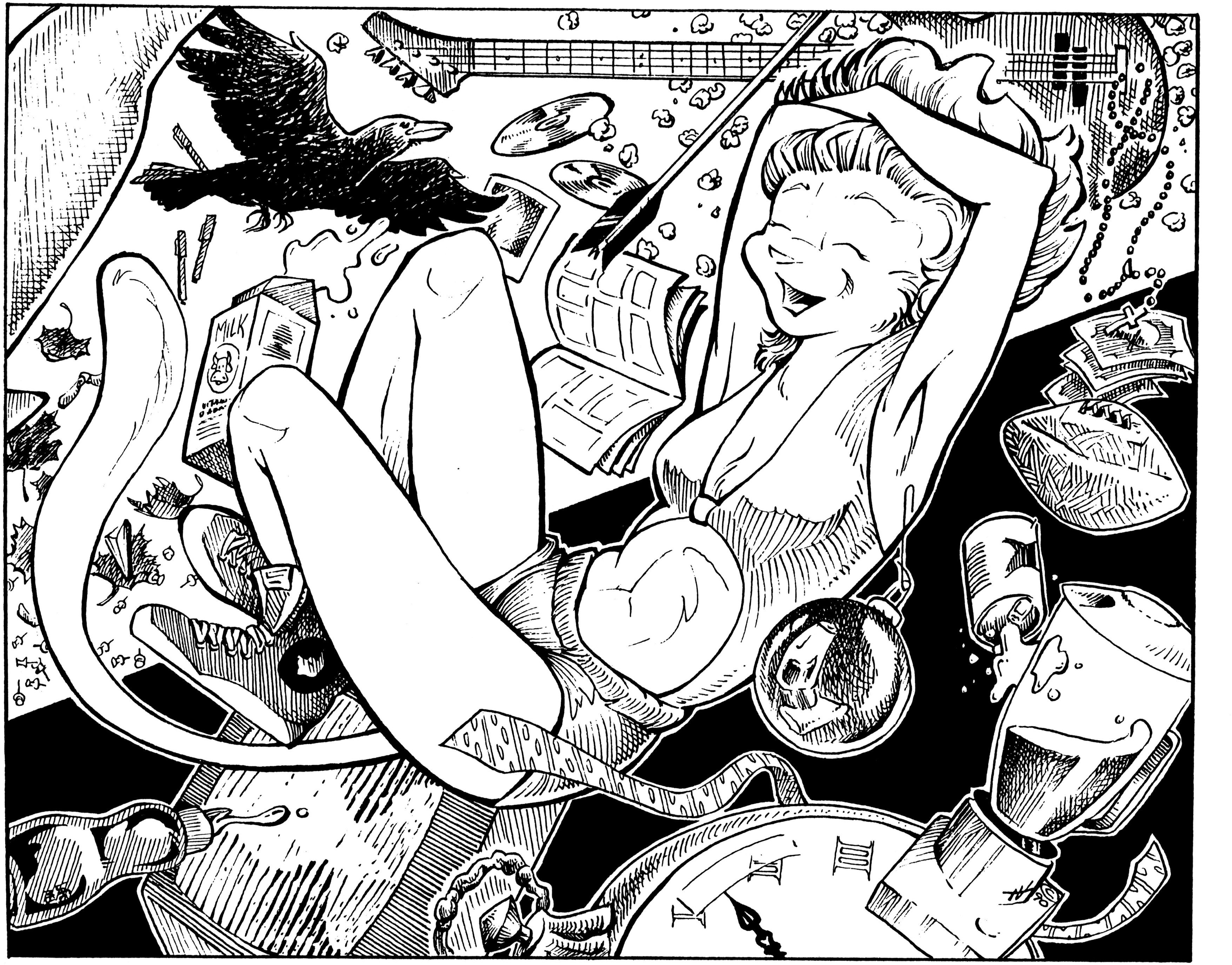

MILK
III
II
I

Travelling Music

Watts Martin

Okay, so doing seventy-five down a narrow two-lane road blasting "Born to Be Wild" from your stereo is a classic cliche. But seriously, can anyone really break the speed limit to Pachabel's "Canon in D?"

Besides, it just happened to be on the radio—and it's not like a 1985 Nissan audio system can really blast anything too loudly (what, ten watts? Fifteen?). And I don't really like the damn song to begin with. But it fit my mood that night. So I turned it up louder.

State Road 72 was a major corridor between the east and west coast of Florida until I-4 was built. Now it's a ghost road. Heading east from Sarasota, you get past Myakka State Park and the world jumps back fifty years. Cypress marsh surrounds you, pressing right up against the road and throwing its vast openness against it in every tree, every cabbage palm, every hyacinth you race past. You only pass a few cars, a few pickup trucks, and more semis than either—the truckers know it's still the fastest way to get things from south Tampa Bay to Palm Beach. The speed limit's fifty-five, but even at sixty-five other vehicles will pass you, including the state troopers. They all have places to be going, of course. I usually don't. I just like driving.

A learned elder once told me my weird habits (like driving long distances for no reason) came from having a weird name. "Spencer" gave me all sorts of trouble in elementary school—I don't care what anyone tells you about children, they're basically obnoxious—but when I hit twenty I came to the conclusion that most of humanity is too damn mundane for its own good. The learned elder who told me the root of my weirdness, incidentally, is one of the most hopelessly mundane people I've ever met.

It was just past midnight and the moon was a day before full, bright enough to light the fields around me as I drove out of Myakka toward real cow country. If I turned off the headlights, the road reflected back a pale grey. I passed the first intersection in a half-hour, a county road leading off to one of Florida's own Twilight Zones, and Steppenwolf faded off the radio. "We're in the middle of an hour-long cruise," the DJ intoned, "and ridin' along with the Fleetwood Mac band." A hard-edged guitar and keyboard started, resolving into "Ebony Eyes," a song near the top of my list of Good Songs Radio Doesn't Play Often Enough. I cranked up the volume even more, straining the pancake-sized speakers to their limit, and sped up.

I passed her during the second verse. My headlights were off; when I realized someone was standing on the side of the road, I snapped them on again just as I raced by. I got a flash of dark skirt and top against golden-tanned skin, beautiful long brown hair and big eyes that could have been the ones "the Mac" wrote the song about. And an arm stuck out, thumb pointed upward.

Now, as you might have guessed, hitchers aren't too common on a road like S.R. 72, especially at fifteen past midnight somewhere equidistant from Sarasota, Arcadia and hell. No matter what direction she was going, she had thirty miles to go, and it was a good guess her car had broken down somewhere nearby. Of course, she was walking in the direction I was coming from—on my side. Either she wasn't very smart about hitchhiking, she was too desperate to be thinking, or she was a psychotic mass murderer waiting for an idiot like me to come along so she could stab me through the heart with a pair of scissors, ditch the car and the body in a cow field on the other side of the state and hitchhike to Kansas. So, I slammed on the brakes and pulled over, then put the car in reverse and backed up slowly.

I started to get out of the car just as she got within about ten feet of it, her body cast in the taillight's red glow. I turned around to greet her and stopped, the words turning to prickly cotton in my mouth.

She had the body of a fashion model, but she didn't have golden skin at all. She had golden *fur*.

And a golden muzzle, with a little black nose on the end of it, big almond-shaped dark eyes framed by her brown hair... mane? And even a long, fluffy tail perfectly matching her hair/mane color. She might have stepped off the stage of "Cats," but Andrew Lloyd Webber would have killed for make-up that perfect. Except something told me it wasn't make-up.

The tail was suddenly flicking back and forth as the expression on her feline face changed from relief to terror. She screamed—I wasn't sure which was more unnerving, the almost-human quality of it or the faint growling undertone—and spun on one heel, running back into the darkness with impossible speed.

"Wait!" I yelled, still half in the car. "Dammit...."

I got out and walked to the spot where she had been, the impressions of her high-heel shoes still in the grass. "Wait," I said again, loudly but without conviction, then turned around and got back in the Stanza. The song finished, merging into Gary Wright's "Dreamweaver." I snapped it off and leaned back in my seat, turning off the engine and staring out the windshield. She could run that fast in heels? Cats didn't stand on their legs and wear clothes... did they?

"You spoke English," a voice said faintly from behind me. I almost fell out of the car, spinning to face the back again. She stood just at the edge of the light. Her eyes were not ebony, but a breathtaking dark emerald. She still looked terrified, her expression now registering not a simple fear for one's safety but the more devastating fear for one's sanity. Then it clicked: she had just expressed surprise that I spoke English... in English. I began to feel some of her fear myself.

"Y... yes," I managed to produce on my third try. I got out of the car and stood up, not moving any closer to her.

She looked me up and down, her expression fighting to stay neutral, her lower lip—if that was the right word—trembling violently. "How...?"

"I've spoken it... all my life." I'm sure that helped her, right? Well, hell. How do you be tactful with an impossibility? "What *are* you?"

She stared at me. "A cat."

Dammit, I can see that.... "Yes. But you're... you're... you don't look like a cat. Not the ones I know of."

She looked at me in uncomprehending terror, then gasped. "You look like Mihi!"

"What?"

"You're... a *human*." She shook her head, the trembling of her lips racing down her body for an instant. "Where'd you come from?"

I gaped at her.

"Did you escape a lab somewhere, maybe?" She was looking down, talking rapidly. "I—I don't know of anybody using humans for experiments, at least not like that, I mean... you're like something from a movie, although I guess you don't—"

"What the *hell* are you talking about?" I shouted. She jumped back, making a small squeaking noise. Then something else clicked; spiders ran down the inside of my spine. "Wait. I'm sorry. What... do humans look like?"

She looked puzzled. "Uh... Mihi is about this high at his shoulders." She bent down, putting her hand a foot off the ground. Her loose blouse fell away from her chest as she did so, affording a glimpse of a body that had nothing but fur in common with any other cat on this planet. "He's... uh... furless, tailless... round head, pug nose, silly ears, uh..."

"Does he walk on two legs or four?"

"Four."

"And he doesn't have opposable thumbs." She shook her head negatively, eyes becoming impossibly wide.

This made Mihi about the size and probably the shape of a chimpanzee. Except he wasn't a chimp.

The most probable explanation for what was happening was I had hit a tree about a half-hour ago and was experiencing uncannily realistic delusions brought about by massive blood loss. Or, maybe the entire road trip this time was a delusion. Or a dream. There, that must be it. I was dreaming I was in the middle of nowhere talking to a hitchhiker who happened to be a six-foot tall cat built like Kim Basinger who had just told me about Mihi... her pet human.

If this was a dream, I should be able to control it. I willed a cup of coffee to appear in my hand.

"What's going on?" the cat asked, her voice husky with the hysteria she was trying desperately to hold back.

I thought about offering her the cup of coffee, except that it hadn't appeared in my hand. This, I suspected, was a very bad sign.

"I don't know."

"You're not some sort of... modified human?"

Modified? "Are you some sort of modified cat?"

She sucked in her breath, eyes narrowing.

"I have a pet cat. About half the size your Mihi must be."

Her expression became angry. "You—"

"He *is* your pet human, isn't he?"

She breathed deeply, fists clenched, then suddenly fell to the ground in a furry heap, tears flowing down her muzzle.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Sitting on the ground... by Route 72, talking... to something that only exists... in cartoons," she got out between sobs.

"State Road 72?"

She looked up and nodded.

"It's the same road for you?"

"Be... between Sarasota and Arcadia. Yes."

"You need to take 70 to get to Arcadia. That's not important." I closed the door of my car, leaning against it.

"How did you know that?" she asked, standing up.

"I could ask you the same question."

"I come down here three or four times a year. I've been doing it for the past five years. My parents live in Sarasota."

"I live there, too. Uh, you know, there aren't any cats... like you... in Sarasota."

She looked blank, then suspicious. "You think it's filled with anthropomorphic humans?"

" 'Anthropomorphic humans?' " I repeated incredulously. " 'anthro' *means* human."

"It means *cat*. 'Anthropomorphic' is in the shape of a cat." She buried her face in her hands. "You're going to tell me... Sarasota *is* filled with anthropomorphic humans."

"Just like the rest of the world."

"Oh, *God*," she said, dragging the last word out into a wail. "This has got to be a—a dream...."

"That's what I think. Or thought. Or hope." I cleared my throat. "But I think I'm dreaming you."

"Am I in a world of humans like you, or are you in a world of cats like me?" she said.

As someone who spends too much time reading science fiction, I had already been making up an explanation: the mysterious cat-person had entered our world without realizing it from a parallel earth where everything was just like it is here, except that cats and humans are somehow... reversed. It hadn't occurred to me that if everything that would have to be real for that to happen really *was* real, it could work both ways. I shoved the idea to the back of my mind; if I let it stay up front I'd lose the rational thought I had now, and I suspected I'd need all of it.

"Your car broke down somewhere on this road," I stated.

"It ran out of gas."

"I'm the first person you flagged down?" She nodded affirmatively. "If your car's ahead of me, then why were you walking on this side of the road, flagging down people travelling toward it?"

"The only gas station I know of is this way. A Union 71. Uh, and you were driving down the wrong side of the road."

She was right about the gas station, if five numbers off. "It's at least ten miles to it. I have a full gas can in the car. I can take you back to your car and give you enough to get to the gas station. You have money?"

"I don't know." She held out a bill, her hand shaking slightly. She didn't flinch when I walked over and took it, which made me feel absurdly relieved. The back of her hand—paw?—was furry, but the sole was a pad. Just like a cat's. I shook my head and examined the fiver she had given me, then pulled out my own wallet, took one out, and silently handed both of them to her.

The layout was identical down to the faint multicolor ink "weaving" under the green, the signatures and serial numbers in the right place. Both bills were series 1986. Hers had a different treasurer's signature on it. The portrait was still of Lincoln, one as a bearded human named Abraham, the other as a bewhiskered lion named Alehsar. Their eyes were the same.

"What slaves did he free?"

She stared at the two bills, mouth moving without any sound. "Cheetah."

I took back my bill and put it back in my wallet, looking down at the ground, at my car's tires, at her nicely-shaped feet... *great set of gams ya got there, considerin' you're a goddamn cat.* I wished very strongly for that cup of coffee.

"Well." I opened the driver's side door, got in, and unlocked the passenger side.

She leaned against the side of the car, big eyes closed. "One of us shouldn't be here."

"Either way, you can't leave your car where it is now."

She wasn't listening; her ears were pricked up (really pricked up, for God's sake), her body taut, staring into the distance. Then I heard it—an approaching car. The lights came around a curve in the distance; I stuck my head out of my window and watched it approach as closely as she did.

The lights came closer, agonizingly slowly, and resolved into the headlamps of an old pickup truck. It was on the left side of the road. My heart skipped a beat, then another, as the truck drifted serenely into the other lane, back again, and back to the right once more. Then I heard the cat's soft whimper. The truck rambled by at about forty per. The driver was a textbook Florida redneck down to the plaid shirt and Budweiser baseball cap, and he was quite human.

That must be it. I was dreaming I was in the middle of nowhere talking to a hitchhiker who happened to be a six-foot tall cat built like Kim Basinger who had just told me about her pet human.

She watched the truck recede into the distance, and was silent for a long time. Then the door opened and she got in without speaking. Her hands were shaking so much she could barely fasten the seatbelt.

I started the engine and pulled back onto the road. "Tell me when we get close." I turned the radio on, softly this time; whispers of Phil Collins' "In the Air Tonight" drifted through the cabin.

About ten minutes up the road, she said, just barely audible over the music, "Slow down."

I did so. We came to a dirt path heading into... nothing. "Down here."

"This isn't a road," I said, pulling over to the side and stopping the engine. I reached in the back and pulled out the gas can.

"I got my car down with no problem."

The path was barely wide enough for two people walking side by side; it stopped about twenty feet away from the road, next to a lonely power meter inexplicably attached to a telephone pole. There was an outlet at the base of the pole. Was the meter for the outlet? I shook my head; the mysteries of Florida Power & Light were not meant for mortal comprehension.

"This way," she said. She had walked past the end of the road, through a maze-like passage between stands of cabbage palms, past a thicket of the ugliest excuse for oak trees I've ever seen into a pristine field of weeds. The weeds looked like they hadn't seen human (or whatever) visitors for millennia. Their peace had come to an abrupt end, however, when the cat had parked her Porsche on top of them.

"That's your car?" I said. It was a 928S4, metallic blue, sparkling in the moonlight, windows tinted to near blackness. "You drove an eighty thousand dollar car into the middle of a cabbage palm thicket?"

"It was better than leaving it alone in the worst part of Florida, wasn't it?"

"This is far from the worst part." I walked over to it. "Can you unlock the gas filler?"

She did so. I removed the cap and emptied my gas can into her tank, then closed everything back up.

"Okay. That's not enough to get where you're going—just to the gas station. I'll have to pay for you."

"I don't *know* where I'm going after the gas station!"

I froze, almost hitting myself in the head with the gas can. Stupid, stupid, stupid... she didn't have any parents to go to in this world's Sarasota.

"Look," I said carefully, "don't try to read anything into this that isn't there. I think you should go home with me and we can try to figure out what to do in the morning."

Her expression was confused; it occurred to me that the thought I *could* be tempted to take advantage of her hadn't even crossed her mind. Presumably that meant the thought of taking advantage of *me* would never occur to her, either. It'd probably seem like sleeping with Mihi. Of course, maybe she did sleep with Mihi; I had certainly slept with Belladonna, my Siamese, on my pillow. But sleeping with a pet is one thing... sleeping with an "anthropomorphic human?" I derailed my train of thought abruptly.

"Do you have any better ideas?" I prompted.

"No," she said. She opened her door and sighed, her absurdly beautiful tail stirring the air languidly, then got in.

"Uh," I said. She paused. "What's your name?"

"Reli," she said after a moment. She rhymed it with *Kelly*.

"I'm Spencer," I said.

"Spencer," she repeated. Her huge green eyes sparkled at me for an instant, not quite short enough to hide the terror still under the surface, then she closed the door and started her engine. Something glinted in the brush near the car for a split-second as the lights hit it, perhaps the eyes of some startled animal.

I walked back to my car, got it going and turned around; by the time I hit the road, her 928S4 was right behind me. She didn't seem to have any problem staying on the right side of the road.

It was about a half-hour later when we pulled into the gas station. I went inside and paid for a fill-up, then went back out and pumped the gas for Reli, who stayed in her car.

As I returned the nozzle to the pump, she rolled down her window. "Thank you," she said.

"All things considered, I'm not doing that much for you," I said, sighing.

"Really? What would have happened if someone else had found me?" she asked. "Would they have helped, or would they have taken me to a lab somewhere?"

"I don't know," I said. "What would have happened if I had been the one in the wrong world?"

"I'd be the one taking you home." She smiled.

I smiled back a little timidly. Then I got in my car and pulled back onto 72, heading back toward Sarasota, the radio still on and a Porsche with a driver from another world following at four carlengths.

I got in my car and pulled back onto 72, the radio still on and a Porsche with a driver from another world following at four carlengths.

About an hour later, we sat down on the floor in front of the couch—a position everyone seems to find more comfortable than the couch itself—and regarded each other over cups of hot chocolate, a twenty-three year old liberal arts major and the Catwoman from Mars.

Reli had a small overnight bag with her, since she had packed for her trip to her parents' house. "They've got to be wondering where I am now," she said softly, ears down.

"Only if time moves the same speed in your world as it does here. Maybe you'll go back and no time will have passed."

"But I'm not from a different world, not really, am I?" She looked across at me, hands on her knees, big eyes even bigger. "It's the same world. But your species and mine are in two different places."

"I suppose so." I felt myself falling into her eyes, and forcibly yanked my attention onto my mug. "Evolutionarily, that doesn't make much sense. Cats don't have the same niche we do. I mean, primates are omnivores, cats are—"

"Omnivores," she said. "Cats are omnivores. And humans don't have opposable thumbs like we do."

"Primates don't make tools?"

She shook her head wonderingly.

"So our two worlds... dimensions, whatever... shared the same planet, and the same evolution except for a few changes millions of years ago. Very, very minor changes."

Reli sipped her hot chocolate, getting a bit of foam on her nose. She flicked it off with a humanlike tongue, then set the mug down on the coffee table and hugged her legs to her chest. "Does this happen with every animal? A different earth with a different dominant species? All in the same time and place but separated by... something else?"

"I don't know. We just need to figure out how to get you back across that something." I stood up and stretched. "The only thing you did different on this trip was to pull off in that weed patch, so it's the only clue we have to go on. Right now, we both need some sleep. At least I do.

"You can take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

She got up and walked to the bedroom door. Her motion was silent and fluidly graceful. "You don't have to do that."

"It's all right."

"The bed looks like it's big enough for two."

I stared at her open-mouthed. The return expression was completely innocent and apparently confused at my reaction. "Uh," she said, "we *are* two different species...."

"We're also two different sexes," I finally said.

"We'd be on separate sides...." Her voice trailed off, and she smiled slightly. "It'd violate your sense of propriety, wouldn't it?"

I sighed. "I suppose you could say that."

She stepped in the bedroom and closed the door halfway, looking back over her shoulder. "In a way, I think that's extremely flattering, Spencer." She shut the door completely.

I wasn't sure what to make of that. As impossible as the situation was, it seemed to follow my typical luck; one of the nicest females I'd met in several years wasn't just from out of town, she was from out of universe.

I finished my cup of chocolate, dropped both mugs into the kitchen sink and threw myself onto the couch. About five minutes after that, there was a scratching at the door; I opened it and Belladonna raced in, heading toward the food cabinet and looking at it impatiently. I sighed, locked the front door, fed the damn cat and threw myself onto the couch again. Belladonna followed suit by throwing herself onto my chest, purring loudly.

I didn't want the Siamese's attention right then, but I've never been able to resist a purring cat, so I kissed her on the nose and stroked her back. Then I started to wonder if Reli's fur would feel the same way. I couldn't imagine what her reaction would be if I asked to pet her, but I didn't think it would be very pleasant. I pushed Donna aside and rolled over, my face against the back of the couch. My sleep was fitful, filled with interesting yet disturbing dreams.

I woke up at about eight the next morning. It was a Saturday, and I usually wasn't up on weekends until noon, but I knew I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep. The Siamese watched me from the coffee table, still looking reproachful over being pushed off the couch when I had fallen asleep.

I put on some coffee and rummaged through the refrigerator, producing four eggs and some bacon. Reli came out just after I had brought in the paper, poured myself a cup and sat down on the couch. She didn't say anything, but just sat beside me, one leg on the couch and almost in my lap, and rubbed her eyes.

Her hair was a mess and her fur was ruffled, the blue nightgown she was wearing tied loosely around her waist, falling off one shoulder and almost—not quite—exposing one nipple, the bottom riding high up on one thigh. She didn't appear to be conscious of the pose, but fur or not, seeing her like that would have driven a monk to suicide. I realized I was quickly becoming aroused to a point that should have been reserved for, say, Paulina Poriskova snuggling up to me, nibbling my earlobe while sliding my pants off slowly. Reli didn't notice the all-too obvious physical component of my feelings, but when I did, I cleverly responded by dropping my coffee cup into my lap. "Shit," I said suavely, jumping away from the couch.

"God, are you all right?" Reli jumped up, holding me steady. As she had risen, she had pulled the robe back onto her shoulder. Part of me was disappointed, but a saner voice in the back of my head pointed out that if it had fallen all the way off, my body would have handled the surge of conflicting emotions—and hormones—by fainting.

"I'm fine," I said, running to the bathroom and pulling off the pants. Fine, fine. Except for a sudden, serious lust for a giant cat, I'm perfectly normal. Fine.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Reli's voice came from outside the door.

"Yes, I'm perfectly n... fine," I gritted, slipping into another pair of underwear and pants. I stepped out again; Reli was trying to keep a concerned expression on her face but looked like she was about to burst out laughing. I hurried past her to the kitchen, hoping my face wasn't the bright red it felt.

"Do you mind if I get some coffee?" she asked, leisurely following me.

"No." I watched her pour the cup and head back to the couch, carried by those superhumanly graceful legs. I wondered if Reli was only of average beauty in her own world; the thought was, in a peculiar way, almost terrifying.

Now, I suppose I have more than my fair share of sexual hangups. Not the typical "I won't do it in position 'X' " type ones, mind you. One of mine is that I can't conceive of "doing it," in any position, with someone I'm not in love with. The rest of them were direct consequences of that one, and could be summed up by the phrase, "he's not getting any." I suspect there's something wrong with a culture where romance and an interesting—or even existent—sex life are often mutually exclusive. The awful suspicion that, after less then twelve hours, I might be closer to falling in love with Reli than I had been with people I had known for years, people who were (or professed to be) in love with me, forced its way into my mind. Of course, I was feeling simple lust then, not love....

Was it as distressing as it was because she wasn't human? I don't have the answer. It certainly wasn't the same thing as being sexually attracted to Belladonna. But if Reli could have known what was going through my mind then, would she have been revulsed? Would she be right to?

I fixed breakfast quickly, bringing out both plates of bacon and eggs and setting them on the coffee table. By this time, Reli had dressed, in a loose, sleeveless light blue blouse and tight grey pants that were almost, but not quite, jeans. They looked like denim but they were lighter, woven loosely to let air circulate through her fur. Light filtered through the few parts not hugging her curves as if they were made of burlap.

"Thank you," she said, taking the plate and starting to wolf down the food. Then she froze. Belladonna, who had wandered into the utility room, had re-emerged and was heading toward the couch.

"That's... a cat, isn't it?" she whispered.

I nodded. Donna wandered up to Reli, who remained stock still, and looked up and yowled inquiringly. The big cat reached down to the little one with a trembling hand and stroked it timidly. The Siamese started purring.

"She doesn't recognize you as another female cat," I said. "You're just a different kind of person."

Reli looked up. "And what about you?"

I looked down, biting back hordes of responses from flippant one-liners to sudden confessions of... er... strong like. "I think she's very perceptive."

Reli considered the response, then smiled. I breathed a silent sigh of relief. "You like cats?"

"I've always liked cats," I said. "Belladonna there takes advantage of that way too often."

Reli raised her eyebrows.

I laughed. "She can be a hell of a nuisance sometimes. But when she rubs up against me and starts purring, she has her way with me every time."

She laughed, too. "Mihi is like that. Always into everything. But his skin is so soft..." she trailed off, then shook her head and pushed the plate away. "When should we be leaving?"

"As soon as you're ready," I said.

If any of my neighbors in the apartment noticed the unusual sight Reli presented, walking in the bright Florida summer sun to a car that easily cost three times any other vehicle on the lot, they made no comment. Most of them probably wouldn't be up before noon on Saturday, either.

"I suppose you wouldn't like to race there," she said as she got in her car.

"Yeah, right," I snorted, dropping into my Stanza. It may make twice the MPG hers does, but it'd have trouble taking on a Ford Escort.

The drive out was uneventful. I'm not sure what I was expecting in the way of events, of course. The road between Myakka and the mysterious patch was unusually busy; we must have seen over a dozen cars in the near-hour long trip.

Both of us parked in the glade itself. Reli navigated the cabbage palms at twice the speed I did and didn't disturb a single frond.

"So now what?" she said when I got out of my car.

"We look for something weird." I scanned around briefly. Yep, looked like an ugly weed patch to me.

"This is where your car stopped yesterday?" I pointed to a flattened area of grass by a stand of trees. "Looks like you hit something."

"It was dark. I hit two things, a cabbage palm and something else. What was it?"

I nudged a dead tree stump with my shoe. The stump was about a foot wide and uprooted, lying on its side with two or three roots still anchored, the others sticking straight up. “Old oak tree, probably hit by lightning hundreds of years ago. All it had was this stump.”

“Oak trees live a long time, don’t they?” She bent down by the stump. “This one would have had to been very old to be that wide.”

“Hundreds of years.”

She brushed at the dirt where the stump had been. “It was rotted clean through. I thought I had hit something small; it didn’t offer any resistance. So it’s probably been dead a long time, too.”

> **“As long as I’m on a parallel dimension, I’d like to see more of it than a cow pasture.”**

“Uh... yes,” I said, trying to figure out where she was going.

“So the dirt that I’m poking through hadn’t seen light for five or six hundred years until last night’s moon.”

I crossed over to her and looked down at the dirt. She had brushed the remaining sand and wood chips off of a highly polished, silvery-black disc about a half-foot across; a straight line was engraved from one side to the other, through the center. “It looks like a solar cell,” I said after a moment.

“It’s not fragile. And I think it goes down quite a way.” She pulled back from it and looked up at me.

I thought for a moment. “Did you hit the cabbage palm before or after you hit this?”

“Before.”

“How soon?”

“Just a second.”

“Okay. You were coming this way”—I traced back along the path toward the road—“so it would have to be along this line. Left or right side?”

“Uh.... left, just like the stump.”

I looked along the line of cabbage palms she should have run into. All were perfectly healthy. “You see the one you hit?”

She stood up. “I remember seeing it in my rearview mirror....” She went over to one of the palms and looked at it. “This...” She looked back at me, confused.

“You hit the cabbage palm in your dimension. You hit the oak stump in this one. Or in both.”

“Then the solar cell... or whatever... brought me here?”

“We can’t convict it yet, but there’s a whole lot of circumstantial evidence pointing to it.

“Drive back over it.”

“What?”

“Drive back over it.”

She looked at me, then got in her car and carefully rolled over the disc. Nothing happened.

“Hmm,” I repeated. “I’d be willing to bet this thing’s the trigger. Some condition isn’t being met.”

“Maybe it really is a solar cell,” she said. “It gathers power during the day and you can only use it at night.”

“It hadn’t seen any sun for hundreds of years when you hit it last night,” I pointed out.

“It could have a very long charge. Or maybe there are more of them somewhere collecting power.”

I sighed. “That’s not very likely.”

“What’s more likely?” She crossed her arms.

“I don’t know.” I slumped against my car.

Reli crossed over to me and put her arm around my shoulder. I tried not to stiffen, but the temptation to just flow into her arms would have been overwhelming if I hadn’t. “Well, if we’re going to wait until the evening to try this again, we shouldn’t just stay here.” She unfairly used the three inches or so she had on me to push me toward her car, then opened the left side door for me.

“What do you have in mind?” I said, looking around the cabin. I expected to be facing the steering wheel and control panel, but there they all were on the right side. I noticed a Passport radar detector clipped to the driver’s visor. Reli climbed in and shut her door, somehow starting the ignition and fastening her seatbelt in one motion. With the windows down, I barely heard the motor come to life.

“As long as I’m on a parallel dimension, I’d like to see more of it than a cow pasture,” she said. The windows rolled up electrically, and the Porsche made its bumpy way back to the road. “I’d like to go see West Palm Beach.”

I fastened my seatbelt, then looked at her in surprise. “Don’t you think that’s a little... uh... dangerous?”

“Probably,” she said, guiding the car onto the pavement.

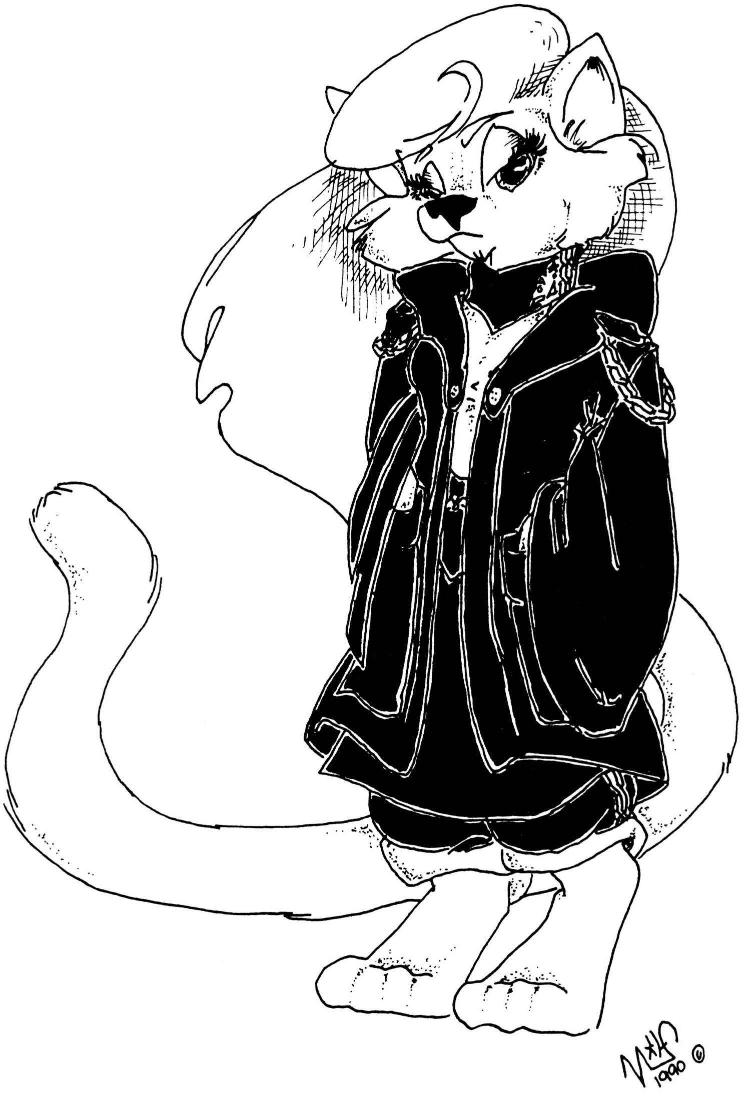
“I’m being serious, Reli. What do you plan to do if a cop, or some National Enquirer-reading redneck, cruises by and sees you?”

“They can’t see through the tint.” She stopped the car on the road, pointed east.

“What if they do?”

She brushed back her hair and smiled a beautiful, innocent smile at me as she shifted into first. Then she floored the engine and popped the clutch. I was slammed back into the seat, my sight clouding momentarily; the only sensation was the sound of squealing rubber. When my vision returned a few seconds later, the speedometer was at 80 and still climbing faster than mine did off the starting line. “We outrun them,” Reli said, reaching up and clicking on the Passport. ❑

To be continued . . .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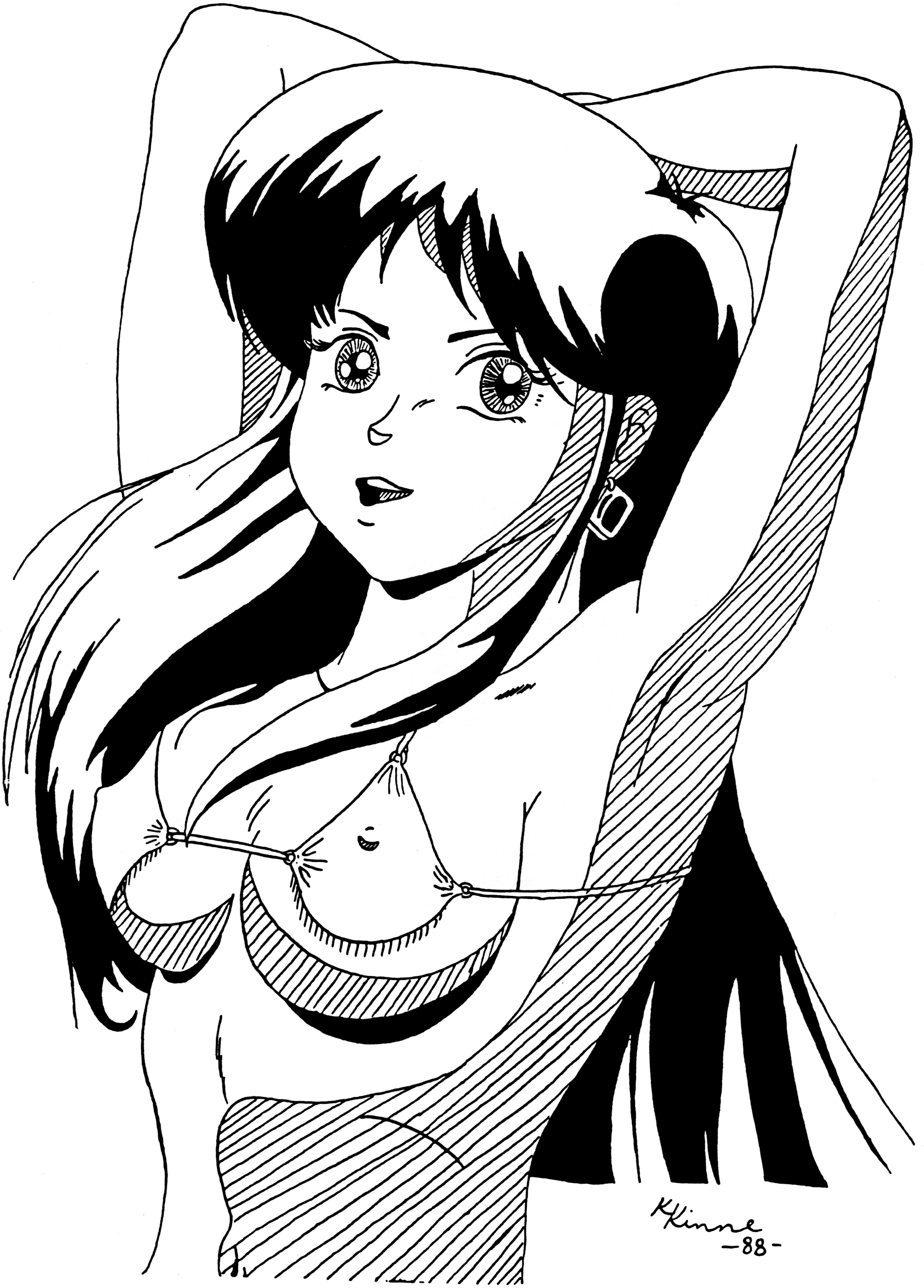

K Kinne
-88-

Captain No-Theft

Gary Jurman

With the cover over his head and flashlight in hand, Jimmy opened the comic book and began to read.

In the first frame, Captain No-Theft was sleuthing through a suspect's trash, searching for a lead to his whereabouts. The can itself was an old style Rubbermaid, the kind they stopped making just after the currency change. It had an "Anarchy" bumper sticker on it. No-Theft dumped the contents in front of the desk, his muscles valiantly bulging in his tights. He made two piles: one of relevant garbage, the other of useless trash. In the irrelevant pile went Baby Ruth wrappers, chocolate milk cartons, and hundreds of black tobacco butts. In the other pile went two speeding tickets totalling well over seven hundred Koku-dollars, a paycheck stub from the Electric Eye Company, and twenty-seven credit card receipts.

No-Theft flipped through the receipts, finding Jolt Cola on the Albatross card, an Italian language chip on the IBM card, a leather Rocker Boy jacket on Coca-Cola's, and a half-centimeter interface jack on the Motorola. In the next frame, he was holding an empty book of matches from "Jonny Matrix's All Nite Dive." At his foot was a nearly empty bottle of fluorescent green hair dye. Jimmy heard a noise in the hallway and clicked off the flashlight, sighing.

Captain No-Theft flew over the city today. Jimmy saw him as he and the family were riding the metro to Grandpa's. He thought that No-Theft's upper body was huge, but he really couldn't tell because the Captain flew so high.

"Archie, look, it's Captain No-Theft!" His older brother pretended not to notice. "Look, Archie!"

"You look, meatbag, and don't call me Archie. I told you to call me Ice." Archie gritted his teeth. Mom turned around in her seat and shot him a dirty look. She could make the perfect reprimanding-mom face, complete with a half-closed fluttering right eye.

"Gee, Celia, wonder if you could get that look on a chip. You know, 'Censure Sneer 2.1,'" Archie replied, squeezing his right pinky.

"That's not funny, Archibald. Now you apologize to your mother."

"Okay, Dad. Sorry, Mom. I can't wait to see Grandpa."

"I hate riding the Metro," Jimmy complained. "And I hate visiting Grandpa. He always makes us eat that weird food. That stuff makes me sick."

"You know your grandfather is a hundred and thirty-two. He's not about to change, Jimmy," Mom said.

"You're just going to have to learn to be a little more accepting if you want to live in Albatross-ville when you grow up, Jimmy," Dad said.

Jimmy stared out the window, watching the Great Albatross Wall zoom by. Plastered over it were large paintings of Captain No-Theft saying, "Real Citizens Never Steal!" The only cool thing about riding the Metro was getting to see lots of Captain No-Theft advertisements.

He still wished Mom and Dad could have afforded an auto; Dad had insisted it was more important to get half medical instead. "Besides," Dad had argued, "Albatross's Metro is free, and it goes everywhere."

When the Metro stopped, the family got off and waited for the badlands bus. The terminal was just inside the Great Albatross Wall. Jimmy looked out through the large bullet-proof window. Some parts looked like jungle, others like desert, and still others resembled what Grandpa said places called *ghettos* were like. He saw Archie staring at the Albatross police in their ultra-light reflective armor; he kept pinching his pinky finger.

Dad approached the man behind the counter, saying something inaudible and handing him his Albatross card. Jimmy turned to see the badlands bus approach the gate. It was heavily armed with battlements on top and it had highly polished unpierceable armor. It glided through the gate like a huge black roach. Jimmy thought no force in the universe would be great enough to stop it. When it docked, the cargo was unloaded by five men in black jumpsuits. One carried out a rack of Captain No-Theft suits. They were of all different sizes: small, medium, large, extra-large. The man pushing the rack winked at Jimmy as he passed by. Then Dad shooed him onto the badlands bus.

The bus approached Morris Group Company Town. The huge gate was as sturdy as five bank vault doors, as tall as a sixteen-story building. It descended into the ground, leaving a six-foot wide gap stretching the length of the opening. The bus, like a cross between a building and a tank, maneuvered into the terminal. Dad handed the terminal operator his Morris Group card. Jimmy watched Archie fiddle with his pinky. Then Archie opened a compartment in it.

Jimmy gasped out loud. "My God, Ice. What did you do to your finger?"

"Shut up, wetbrain! If you tell Dad I'll throw you outside the wall."

"I promise I won't tell. What's it for?"

"Later. Just be quiet about it, okay?"

While riding the Morris Group Metro, Jimmy pulled out his Captain No-Theft comic book. It would only be a few minutes until they reached grandpa's, but he wanted to get a few more frames in before they arrived.

No-Theft was in front of Jonny Matrix's All Nite Dive. Judging from how beaten up the cars were and the condition of the roads, Jimmy figured that the bar was somewhere in the badlands. Another giveaway was that the building and road were inked in black and white.

When No-Theft opened the door to the bar, a thick fog poured out, along with three men and a woman. All of them looked exactly like James Dean. They wore black leather Rocker Boy jackets embroidered with the words "The Jimmy D's." The woman had a bionic left arm that was visible because her sleeves were rolled up; the arm stuck out like a sore thumb. Parts of it were transparent so that you could see the artificial muscles. The outer parts of it that were not see-through were covered with Skintex. She sneered at No-Theft while he shouldered his way in. As he entered the bar, the armored bouncer stepped aside.

"I'm here on business," No-Theft said casually, leaving the bouncer behind him. With No-Theft in the foreground, the backs of several people could be seen at the bar. Three of them were Jimmy D's and one of them was a large-breasted blonde with a half-shaved head. There was a chip slot in the shaved side of her head, and judging from the red glare inside the slot, she was running cyberware. She had a pistol strapped to her thigh; Jimmy guessed she might be running a marksman chip.

In the next frame No-Theft spotted the villain sitting at a table in the corner. He didn't appear to be sporting any bionics or enhancements. He had five drinks lined up in front of him. The drinks were all labeled: cappuccino, Jolt Cola, Kamikaze, Zombie, and chocolate milk. Behind them was a plate of pork rinds. An overflowing ashtray was to one side, and he was smoking. No-Theft approached him, the villain's glowing lime mohawk piercing the smoke.

When No-Theft opened the door to the bar, a thick fog poured out, along with three men and a woman. All of them looked exactly like James Dean.

Like tombstones in a veteran's graveyard, the houses in Grandpa's neighborhood were perfectly in line. No matter what angle Jimmy stared at them from, they always grouped into successive patterns. Grandpa was assigned to live there because he had been an executive at the Morris Group beverages factory. All of the Morris Group corporate executives lived in his neighborhood. Unlike Albatross-ville, Morris Group Town was a democratic unit when it came to nonoccupational and certain governmental issues. The community voted on city ordinances dealing with everything from the corporate towns they would order their supplies from and what items would stock the corporate store's shelves to the length of the grass the lawns should have, and what color the houses should be.

Grandpa lived on Shire Lane. The Metro stopped at the neighborhood shuttle station and the family headed straight for a shuttle; one left every five minutes or when they were needed. They boarded the navy blue egg-shape and the short trip began. The car had no passengers except them, so Jimmy got to sit in the very back and look at the cargo.

"Oh, no. A package for Grandpa from Tech Labs Town. Just great. Now I have to listen to him ramble on about one of his new gadgets."

"Don't be so wet. Let me see it," Archie answered, leaning forward in his seat.

"Leave the mail alone," the bus driver said with a look of condescension. "If you touch it that's a corporate offense. You may not know this, son, but we have the death penalty in this town." Archie fell back into his reclined position, squeezing the Skintex on his pinky. Jimmy reached back to make sure that his comic book was still in his back pocket.

He suddenly wondered why Captain No-Theft only flew over Albatross-ville. Then he wondered why No-Theft always flew in the same direction.

"Ice? Why does Captain No-Theft always fly west?"

"Maybe he has no choice. You should stop reading all those comic books."

"But it's true. Every time I've ever seen him, he was always flying west."

"Did you ever think that maybe he's not what he appears to be?"

Grandpa's house was number two thousand fifty-two. He let everybody in, and directed them to the living room where he began to open his package.

"All right, you guys know the routine. If you're hungry, just dig in." He pointed to a large silver tray with stacks of foil-wrapped blocks on it. Jimmy looked at Mom and sighed.

"Grandpa, what is this stuff you're always makin' us eat?" Jimmy asked.

"You know, son, one day the world is gonna take a shit, and some of us will be prepared," Grandpa replied cryptically while hanging his radiation suit in the closet.

"Is all this really necessary?" Mom said.

"Let me tell you something, Celia. About sixty years ago it almost happened. You and my son weren't around back then but the world was a different place. No badlands, armored cities... or corporate comic books. There were non-corporate governments, and when they were arguing over their political mumbo-jumbo, they managed to knock out the world's communication systems. For two days rioting and looting were the way of life for the poor slime, the street punks. Most of the others just stayed at home and locked their doors. But those of us who were ready could have held up for a year without so much as opening a window.

"The reason why the world is the way it is today is because the corporations were on top of things. We all knew they wouldn't die easy, but we didn't know that they were really alive. It was amazing how the corporate coworkers, including myself, grouped together like cells of an organism and picked up the pieces. In days there were crude corporate towns; in a few weeks the communication systems were back online, and the corporate organisms slew the governments and ate them. Like snakes eat rats. You know how you kill a corporation?"

"How many times are you going to give us this lecture?" Dad replied.

"I'll do it, Bill, until it gets through your thick heads. Corporations *can* be killed, you know, and when the one you live in goes, you better be ready. Can you cross the fifty miles of badlands it takes to get to the nearest town from Albatross? Do you have an auto? Are you prepared for a nuclear assault from a rival corporation? There are corporate wars all the time. I should know—I was an exec for thirty years." He looked at

Jimmy. "I'll tell you what you're eating, son. Survival rations. I have to constantly rotate them so that I know they'll last for five years after the shit hits the fan."

"You really do know where it's at, Grandpa," Archie said. Grandpa opened his package and pulled out some more foil-wrapped blocks.

"After we have some of my birthday cake, I'll show you the new artillery that came last week, Archie." He opened up his cupboard and restocked shelf B-13. "I also have some sub-zero gear you haven't seen yet."

Jimmy opened the comic book again on the way back from Grandpa's. Captain No-Theft was sitting at the table in front of the villain. "All right, Anarchist, you've been proven guilty of theft of public safety for speeding in your auto, theft of road service for not paying the dues for the road you speeded on, theft of environment for not having the proper emissions equipment on your auto, and theft of copy protected software for exporting bootleg chips to the badlands." No-Theft grabbed the Anarchist's forearm and ripped off its Skintex sheath. Then he opened it to find an empty compartment inside. Jimmy's eyes opened wide.

"I'm afraid I have to tell you that your membership in the town Albatross-ville has just been made void. If we catch you in the town again, we're going to have to *throw* you out." No-Theft reached inside the breast pocket of the Anarchist's Rocker Boy jacket and pulled out his Albatross card. He took out a pair of scissors and cut it in half. "You now have as many Kokudollars as there are in your pockets."

With comic book in hand, Jimmy knocked on Archie's door.

"Archie—I mean, Ice? I need to talk to you."

"What do you want?"

"Let me in. I need to talk to you." Archie opened the door. Jimmy stepped inside and looked around the room. It was not the room it used to be. The posters had changed from hot cars and funny soft drink ads to a collage of nude women with bionic parts and design drawings of various cyberchips. He had an enormous poster of punks roaming the badlands. Jimmy picked up a magazine off the table. It was a special Albatross publication for workers that had bionics and cyberware installed as a part of their occupations. Jimmy flipped to the section on how to psychologically adjust to high-tech implants.

"What do you want?" Archie repeated. He walked into the closet carrying a hunting knife that had a compass embedded in the handle. He put it in a large chest that also contained an old-style army radio and a generator. Jimmy remembered seeing the generator at Grandpa's two years ago.

"I know you're running, Ice."

Archie turned and stared at his brother through slitted eyes. "Shhh. You want to get me killed?"

"Why are you doing it?"

"Like Grandpa said. We gotta be prepared. I'm saving up for bionics and cyberware. Tomorrow I'm going to a place in the badlands to get a weapons interface and a few chips."

"Archie! They have to destroy parts of your brain to do that!"

"They're being replaced with stuff that's better. Metal is better than meat. People do it all the time." Archie pointed at the magazine.

"That's different. How are you going to get there?"

"I'll take the Metro to the gate."

"Yeah, but you want walk through the badlands. What're you gonna do from there?"

"None of your business." Archie turned away. "I told you too much already. So go away and leave me alone."

"You think Dad's not going to notice a glowing metal slit in the side of your head?"

"You read too much of that comic. It'll be covered with Skintex and artificial hair." Archie pushed him out of the room.

Jimmy had not opened the comic in two weeks. Over the course of that time, he had not spoken to Archie unless directly addressed. Today he decided to fish under his bed to find the comic book. He found it under a pile of old clothes, a synthetic jelly sandwich, and school books from last year.

Just as he opened it up, there was a knock at the door. Dad answered it. A man from the Albatross police stood outside, Archie standing behind him. Archie was handcuffed, staring at the floor at Dad's feet. Jimmy moved closer and heard the guy telling Dad that Archie had to appear in court tomorrow. Dad closed the door and broke the disposable cuffs from his wrists.

"What happened?" Jimmy asked, creeping out of the hall.

"Go to your room, Jimmy. Your mother and I have to talk to Archie alone for a while." Jimmy slowly returned to his room, slamming himself onto his bed and reaching for the comic book.

The Anarchist had a grappling hook, and was tossing it over the Great Albatross Wall. He scaled the wall and climbed down the other side, landing right in front of a giant No-Theft painting. Then he ran into an executive neighborhood. In the background there were a couple of houses that had autos in the driveways. The Anarchist ran up to one of the cars, a black antique Excalibur, ripped off its convertible roof, jumped in, and drove away. There were some frames of him speeding around town and running stop signs. Another frame showed him peeling out on someone's front lawn.

In the last frame of the reckless driving sequence, Captain No-Theft could be seen on the horizon. No-Theft flew up to the car and, landing on the hood, grabbed the Anarchist from it. On the next page he was brought to the corporate court building. The president of Albatross ordered that since the Anarchist had come back after being asked not to return, he should be thrown out of Albatross-ville, as all returning criminals were.

Captain No-Theft brought the Anarchist to the east corner of town. A large, ominous contraption filled the background. In the next frame, it became apparent that the machine was a giant catapult. No-Theft dropped the Anarchist in the cup of the catapult and set the device off. The arm whipped forward, hurling the Anarchist high above the city. In the last frame, the Anarchist was shown flying westward toward a pile of mangled, bloody bodies, obviously destined for the same fate. Jimmy closed the comic book, tears swelling in his eyes, and cried himself to sleep.

"I've been kicked out of Albatross-ville," Archie told Jimmy.

"Where will you go?"

"Me and Dad are going to Grandpa's. I'm going to live there."

"I'm going to miss you, Archie. I wish you didn't have to go."

"You can visit me all the time."

Jimmy gave his brother a good-bye hug. "I'm going to be all alone now."

"You'll have Mom and Dad."

Jimmy lay awake in bed, reading *Attack of the Flying Squid*, a sci-fi novel about alien mollusks. Just as he reached their descent to Earth, he heard a rap on the window. He looked outside and saw Archie standing on the roof of the terrace, his left arm casting faint reflections. Jimmy let him in. "Archie, what are you doing here?"

"I had to run some chips to a guy down the road, so I decided to drop by."

"If they catch you here, they'll catapult you out of the city!"

"Relax. Nobody's gonna catch me."

"My God! Your arm. What happened?"

"You like it? Bionic. I couldn't quite afford the Skintex for it, but I couldn't wait to get it." Archie showed off the lightning speed he could manipulate the fingers at.

"Wow. I bet you could play a mean guitar."

"I'm working on getting a Rocker Boy chip next. Grandpa's got an old electric guitar that he's lettin' me have."

Captain No-Theft flew over Albatross-ville today. His red and blue suit sailed across the morning sky, and small children all around stood outside their doors to watch him fly. Jimmy stood on the front porch and watched. What a beautiful scene, he thought. And today No-Theft was actually sparkling as he flew by. He had never noticed that before.

He waited for Mom to pack his lunch for school; he hoped she would not include a synthetic jelly sandwich. ❑

The Reformed Church of the SubGenius(Discordian)

Rev. Dr. Mitchell L. Silverman, KSC
Episkopos

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"Furry"

Kay Shapero

(Sung to the tune of "Richter Scale")

Hadn't had a date in months and I was getting nervous
So decided I would try the local dating service
Paid their fee, filled out their form and things were going fine
Until they saw what I'd put on the "favorite hobbies" line . . .

I am a
Feline, canine, vulpine, feathered, winged and taloned furry
Every time I'm at a con I draw crowds in a hurry
My artwork is erotic
Though it isn't quite obscene
I'm having lots of fun with this, as odd as it might seem.

This reply appeared to cause the sales rep consternation
Back she came to ask me for some kind of explanation
When I said she'd read it right, it threw her for a loss
She said she couldn't enter it, then brought me to her boss.

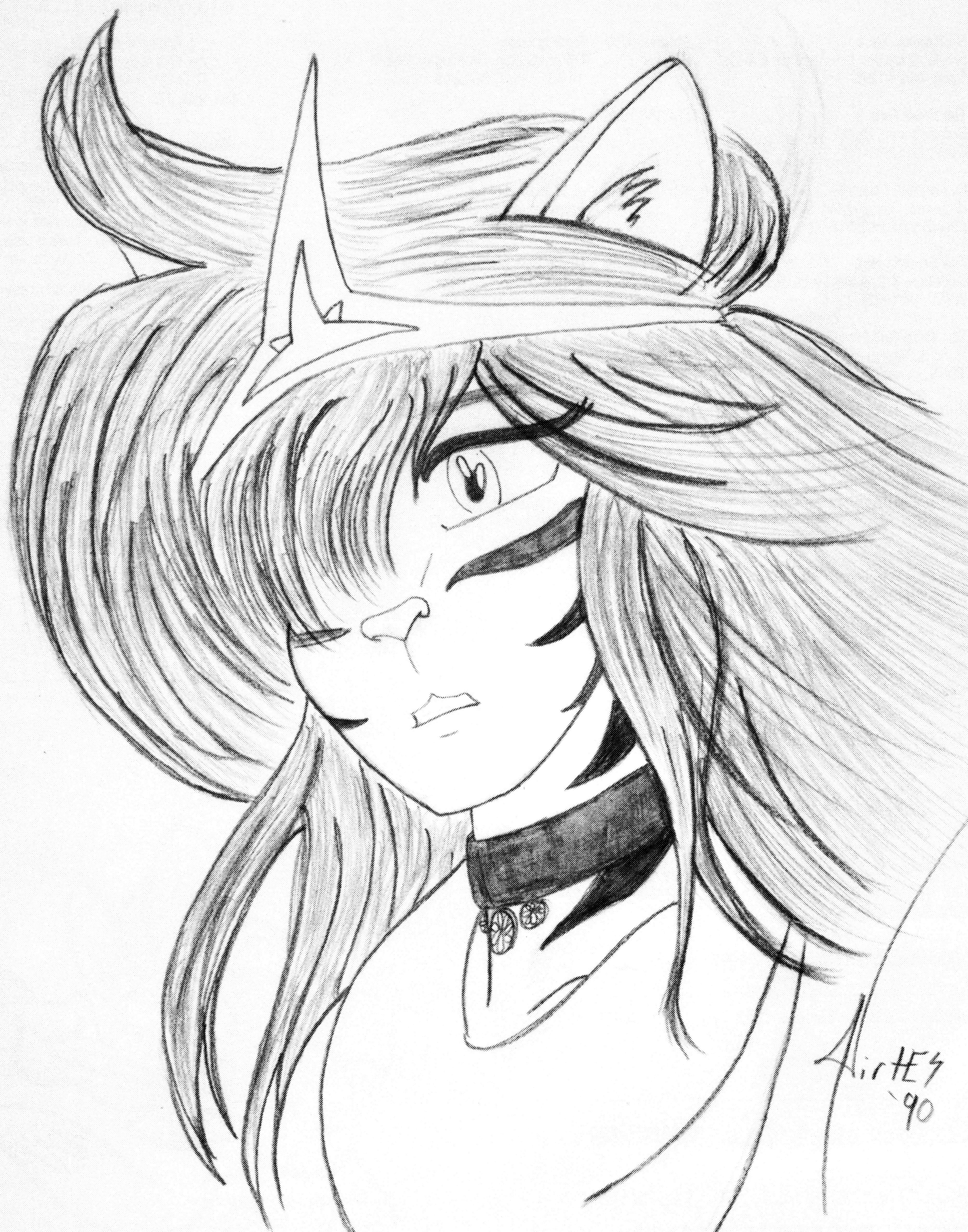
"So you're the
Feline, canine, vulpine, feathered, winged and taloned furry
At SF cons you specialize in mob scenes in a hurry
This doesn't fit our data forms
Some changes must be made
You'll have to see my boss to deal with this one, I'm afraid."

So it went on up the line, "Are you sure this is legal?"
Something like a Moose, or Elk, or F and O of Eagle?"
Everything they put in the computer came back out
I had to fly to Omaha to find someone with clout.

"Yes, I'm the
Feline, canine, vulpine, feathered, winged and taloned furry
I'm sorry if this seems to set you all in such a flurry
I've heard a lot about your club
I'm told it's simply great
But all I want to know is can you folks find me a date?"

At the top, the president just smiled and said, "Don't worry,
I think we can solve this little problem in a hurry,
Bypass the computer;
And discuss it one on one . . ."
We're at an SF con right now and say we're having fun

'Cause he's a
Dragon, merman, centaur, griffin, unicornish high elf
Couldn't be a better match if I'd dreamed him up myself
Together we're the strangest pair
That folks have ever seen
Come to the Furry Party room and you'll see what I mean!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REMOTE ACCESS SYSTEMS

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Use this issue as a guide to what we'd be likely to print. (We really do print less depressing material, as well.) Just send in whatever, and if we like it (and can find room for it, etc.) we'll use it. Deadline for issue #3: September 1.

We prefer prose on Macintosh diskette (MacWrite or WriteNow!), but we'll accept Z-System, Amiga, MS-DOS, or Kaypro II CP/M diskettes (ASCII plain text, please) or as a last resort that garish white flat stuff made from sliced dead trees. Please send a copy of your text... not the only copy, eh?

Submit artwork as two high-quality photocopies. If high-quality photocopies are unavilable, send original or photograph. Do not send originals without a postpaid return mailer. And PLEASE don't fold artwork!

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